

2014

# And By The Grace Of God, We'll Travel West

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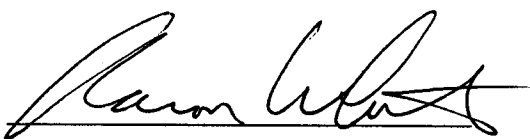
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And By the Grace of God, We'll Travel West

(TITLE)

BY

Aaron White

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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2014

YEAR

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Critical Introduction

Spring 2014

Screeching and Yammering and Clothed in Smoke:

Finding the Cowboy's Place in the Literature of Terror

Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929) and Molly Gloss (b. 1944), two of the greatest chroniclers of the American West, recently spoke at AWP 2014 in Seattle, WA about the western genre in detail. When commenting on the American cowboy in literature and film, Gloss, author of *The Jump-Off Creek* (1989) and *The Hearts of Horses* (2007), said, “We see a crossroads where the West we know meets the Western myth-making machine.” This struck a chord with me, and I started to see my own novel, *And By the Grace of God, We'll Travel West*, running in this vein. When I conceive an image of the traditional western novel or film, I picture, to borrow from Heinlein, “a stranger in a strange land.” For example, Owen Wister’s “Virginian,” or Latin American *gauchos*, or Mexican *vaqueros* all come to mind, full of grit and *machismo*. With nothing but a steed and gun they embark on new territory, perhaps stumbling upon a town riddled with Indian attacks, or bandits, bodies bouncing in the dust like errant tumbleweeds. Author Frank Gruber (1904-1969) conceived a formula for the basic plot arc of any western. Readers will recognize a running theme of invading technology, such as railroads and telegraph lines. Landowners are all-too-often forcing downtrodden ranchers from their rightful homes. Outlaw gangs plague small saloons, drinking and brawling and sodomizing. Novelist Jory Sherman (b.1932) sought for something more than “ranch,” “empire,” or “revenge” plots (Lowry 22). He looked for a commonality, a universal

thread sewn through the skin of the western, acting as a strand binding each narrative.

Sherman quested for the “soul” of the western. He said, “There is a universal structure to the western novel that goes beyond the call to adventure, the journey into the deepest, darkest cave, and it is this: The hero’s search for his true father” (Law 1).

The divide between Gruber and Sherman’s theories embodies Gloss’s crossroads, where the soul of the western meets the myth-making machine that cranks out the familiar assembly line of stories about outlaws and gunplay. Eric Hobsbawm, author of *Fractured Times* (2013), said in a recent article in *The Guardian* that “the ‘western’ in its modern sense—that is, the myth of the cowboy—is a late variant of a very early and deeply-rooted image: that of the Wild West in general.” He sees the American West as a place where nature must confront civilization, where explorers seek something that cannot be found elsewhere. The western genre is a derivative of the frontier we Americans should intrinsically know, the same frontier that the country’s pioneering ancestors traversed by foot and wagon.

It’s hard to imagine such sentiments having much relevance today, especially when the masses have embraced technology and abandoned all notions of westward expansion. Yet, we have played audience to 9/11, one of the greatest American tragedies that occupy space in a dismal timeline with The Great Depression and the attack on Pearl Harbor. In some sense, we’re just as vulnerable as the pioneers to onslaught and disease while America moves across the global terrain and, whether physically or symbolically, claims territory as its own. And here we meet the crossroads again, where the distinction between the real American West and the imagined West of folklore blurs in our collective consciousness. Notions of Old West justice throbbed strong in the hearts of those masses

riling an attack on the Muslim threat to America's freedom. Hobsbawm recognizes that the invented tradition of the West "is a product of the eras of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan. And of course, Reagan, the first president since Teddy Roosevelt whose image is deliberately western and on horseback, knew what he was doing." George W. Bush, the Texan president with a swagger called "walking," said shortly after the 9/11 tragedies that, "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended" (McCaleb). This "defense" called for America, like a mythologized Cowboy, to ride into a troubled town called Afghanistan. Back home, large facets of the television and Internet media spewed scripted worshipping of the gun and the freedom it sought to protect. No one could take it from our "cold, dead hands."

Keeping this in mind, it's perhaps not so coincidental that the American literature raised from the ashes of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks bears striking resemblance to the western as described by Gruber, Sherman, Hobsbawm, and Gloss. Novels like Don DeLilo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), all chronicle strangers in strange lands. DeLilo's Keith Neudecker, his estranged wife Lianne, and his elderly mother-in-law Nina must navigate a New York City landscape still oozing from its fresh wound, darkened by, what Art Spiegelman calls, "The Shadow of No Towers." Foer's nine-year-old Oskar Schell tries desperately to reassemble meaning in his own life, piecing together the puzzle of his late father's lone key bequeathed after the felling of the World Trade Center. Egan's characters must somehow cope with their robbed youth and embrace a strange post-9/11 world. The defeated towers bond these narratives. All of their characters are emotional pioneers struggling to establish normalcy in a new

land, where the primal urge to run and cower in the face of disaster is strong. They're cowboys in their own right. The search for *something*, whether or not it's Sherman's idea of the true father, drives their acumen. The antagonist, for some, is a "faceless coward," and for others it is all-too-familiar. The common landscape of post-9/11 literature is rocked by cataclysm. It is, as DeLilo puts it, "a time and space of falling ash and near night" (3). Aaron DeRosa, in his article "Analyzing Literature after 9/11," says, "The successful 9/11 novel transcends 'jingoistic discourse or media insipidities' and recognizes that after an event like 9/11, 'all that remains is bafflement [...]' (609). All of these novels share the same things a successful western, whether it be "clichéd" or "heartfelt," has, which are a strong sense of place, hardened protagonists, and most importantly of all, a looming sense of death.

However, unlike the traditional western novel, events surrounding the attacks are difficult to fashion into any sensible narrative. Post-9/11 literature innately embodies this fact. Physical and emotional obstacles, such as falling debris or the loss of a loved one, are hard to circumnavigate. Our postmodern protagonists are turned around, disoriented. Yet even though they're in the thick of it, the reeling aftermath of the disaster is not confined to the borders of New York City. When the towers fell they sent a seismic wave rippling across the country, even the world. A large majority of current literature doesn't address the devastating effects 9/11 has had on those living beyond the fringe. According to an article in *Commentary Magazine* entitled "Complete Annotated Guide to 9/11 Novels" (2011), author D.G. Myers says, "The books [9/11 novels] fall into two main groupings—those in which men and women must live in the aftermath, and those in which the 9/11 attacks are mere episodes in a larger environment of terror, where politics



are more telling than experience.” Some novels, such as Hugh Nissenson’s *The Days of Awe* (2005), are bold enough to imagine jumping from the north tower’s 102<sup>nd</sup> floor. They are centered directly in the disaster. Others, like Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011), chronicle the conflicts of those New Yorkers hit hardest by the attacks, in this case an American-Muslim designing the memorial at Ground Zero. These narratives occupy the category of “Living in the Aftermath,” according to Myers. Those novels approaching 9/11 on a larger scale are called stories of “The Global War on Terror” and include prose such as John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006) and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005). In Updike’s novel, a half-Egyptian boy is introduced to a Jihadi terrorist cell. McEwan’s book follows a London neurosurgeon whose day begins with watching a “plane on fire.” Myers makes the contention that all thirty-some-odd books written in the decade following 2001 add, “little that cannot be learned” from authors like Joseph Conrad and Philip Roth. 9/11 novels do not accomplish much more than exploring “a sighing preciousness that trivializes its serious subject.” What Myers fails to appreciate is the complexity in describing bafflement. He’s looking for a way to categorize a growing number of disparate stories written as frenziedly as the attacks themselves. He struggles, just as the victims, to find meaning in chaos.

*And By the Grace of God, We’ll Travel West*, when complete, will occupy a different space altogether in the fledgling body of 9/11 literature. The novel defies Myers’s pigeonholing, as it is neither directly involved in the disaster, nor is it concerned with global terrorism. This story doesn’t attempt to tidy disarray, yet it is not an effort to confuse, or aggrandize, or mythologize. Rather, this work is focused on examining an entire generation of youth marred by the incursion. It is written for the Millennials, a

generation of men and women in their twenties who have grown up in the age of the internet, people subjected as children to the War on Terror. The Millennial must scrutinize a myriad of conflicting information in the digital age. *This* story of 9/11 questions both reality and hyperbole. It lassos and binds the gap between the western and the literature of terrorism, of tragedy. It attempts to pinpoint and isolate the product of the myth-making machine, to merge the crossroads between the West we know and the West we think we know. It is a new western for a new age. *And By the Grace of God* has evolved past the days of standoffs and saloons. Rather, it melds elements of the classical western's grandiose melodrama with a post-modern aesthetic, written for an audience of young men and women whose childhoods have been haunted by the ominous ghost of mass-media hysterics. As well, it voices concern for the direction of the Millennial youth and how prepared they are to inherit the fractured America they have been given.

Opening in November of 2000, the novel's protagonist, a ten-year-old and part-Iranian boy named Noah, runs barefoot in the frigid cold. His pajama shirt is stained with blood. Against a backdrop defined by dread, much like the one DeLillo captured so beautifully in the ashen microcosm of the devastated financial district, Noah cuts through his neighborhood and reaches the quiet highway bordering the withering town of Weston, Colorado. He becomes light-headed, dizzy and disoriented. He runs to the point of no longer being able to feel the stab of rocks littered about the road. An ambulance siren begins to cry in the distance and a plane soars overhead, foreshadowing catastrophic events to come as the boy catches a patch of ice and falls into unconsciousness.

Noah's fall frames the first half of the story, one about a boy orphaned and taken under the wing of his ailing grandfather, John, a WWII veteran who is unsuspectingly in

the grip of Alzheimer's disease. Under John's tutelage, Noah discovers a 1950s television western that blends elements of *The Lone Ranger* and Eastwood's film *Unforgiven* (1992). He becomes fascinated and transfixed by the hero who is a hardened, yet glamorous, Hollywood cowboy with a vendetta. In some sense, this mythological notion of the cowboy becomes Noah's moral beacon. He looks to it in times of uncertainty, wholeheartedly believing in the questionable lessons learned from a fictionalized portrait of the Old West. To a large degree the television itself, to quote Harlan Ellison, acts as a "glass teat." This invasion of technology, as described by Gruber's formula, can be quite detrimental. But much like Noah himself, it's an anachronism, especially in a time when the cellphone is beginning to evolve into the smart device we know so well today. Noah's unhealthy hero-worshipping soon becomes more of a need than a symptom. Here the hyperbole, the bombastic spectacle reminiscent of the showcasing led by Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is preferable to the realities of Weston, an unincorporated town riddled with poverty. Noah's incessant television watching becomes a coping mechanism for the trauma of being orphaned. Unlike Foer's nine-year-old character Oskar Schell, or Francine Prose's thirteen-year-old protagonist named Bart in the novel *Bullyville* (2007), Noah's parents did not work white-collar jobs in the World Trade Center, or on Wall Street. They were unable to provide him with any kind of formal training, education, or even emotional stability that would lend to the mental faculties necessary for coping with tragedy.

Therefore, Noah must rely on his grandfather, but throughout the first half of the novel, John desperately grapples with his own set of demons. He's lost his wife to old age, his son, Noah's father, to drugs, and his daughter to misplaced acrimony. Coupling

his emotional pain with the withering of his mind and body, he leaves parenting Noah to television and the defective gospel of the local church. As John's memory both haunts and betrays him, he projects his suffering onto Noah by hardening the boy for a world he believes is riddled with moral depravity. John's Old Testament teachings sometimes foil Duke Ford's, and the division between John's reality and scripted television fiction is hard to decipher.

Noah, much like the millennial generation in whole, must navigate his way through a mess of inconsistent philosophies. After learning how to come to terms with his grandfather's senility, John dies. Noah is once again left alone, armed only with a sketchy sense of antiquated awareness. Connie, Noah's paternal aunt, is charged with the reins in Noah's education. She brings him from Weston, steeped in Old West mythology, to Peach Lake, New York, a small farming community resting in the path of Flight 11. Once John, a tower of a man, falls, Noah's world, as well as the physical narrative, is rocked into chaos. Every fleeting institution about him begins to crumble.

*And By the Grace of God* asks a lot of questions. Noah's development throughout the course of the novel is an exploration. It embodies my own fears about the many directions my generation could be headed. A large percentage of young Americans in their twenties have grown with the internet. Media constantly dictates their alliances and interests, much more so than it ever has in previous decades. These men and women are reaching critical years in their development, their lives, amidst a rocky economy, fears of terrorism, and a divide in global unity. While an opportunity exists to glean some good from it all, I myself, while optimistic, must remain skeptical. I like to believe that Noah's story is a worst case scenario. The boy ultimately chooses violent outburst as a form of

rebellion. It's an urge many of us have and one that's been instilled in him, to be the archetypal cowboy and pull a six-shooter, look our antagonist dead in the eye, and be done with it.

Ideally, this novel will be read as a work of postmodern fiction. My intention in writing this piece is not to be overtly political. As a writer, I very much appreciate subtlety and understatement, which is why this novel is unassuming. It forgoes any heavy-handedness or air of pretentiousness. *And By the Grace of God*, as a whole, shuns the same glamor and commercialism Noah is raised with, both in the form of *Duke Ford* and his aunt Connie, whose materialistic drive knows no bounds. Noah has no responsible adult force in his life. While he learns quite a bit, he's ultimately directionless. Writing and shaping his story has taught me, as the author, a lot about my own interests in fiction writing. It has given me a better handle on my authorial voice and established my own aesthetic, which can, at times, be both baroque and reserved. *And By the Grace of God* has reinvigorated my love for westerns, but more so, my skepticism of the American myth. I've learned to question the crossroads, and I hope to inspire my readers to do the same.

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Aaron White

Novel Excerpt

Spring 2014

And By the Grace of God, We'll Travel West

Book One

Look all the way out there, Noah. What do you see?

Noah runs.

His Texas ten-gallon hat, made of straw and emblazoned with a blue plastic star, clumsily tumbles behind him down the straight length of asphalt. Houses line the street to his left and right. Their frosted windows awaken to meet the cold gray of early November morning with the orange glow of lampshades. For Noah, time slows with each painstaking block that he runs. His breath lingers behind him in smoky tufts and his t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms stick to his sweaty skin. Each frigid inhalation of Colorado air stings his nostrils and he finds it increasingly hard to breathe.

Noah runs and cuts a corner toward a back street that houses only a barn and an abandoned general store overgrown with brown weeds. The air feels as if it is heavier than water and his movement is nightmarishly slow compared to the hurried spinning of his surroundings. His head feels heavy and swims in its own weight. Noah pants and slowly works through the pain in his bruised heels, kneecaps and palms until there is an absence of feeling. His bare feet no longer scream out against the assault from errant rocks littered amongst the road.

Noah runs and he can't remember why he is running anymore. He's struggled through the cold and made it to the highway lined with towering telephone poles. Not far in the distance sits the death-smelling coal plant where Grandpa sometimes spent twelve or thirteen hours a day. But Grandpa tells Noah he's too young to remember that far back. Noah can and does remember, however, the familiar sandpaper touch of Grandpa's hands under his bare arms one warm evening not long ago. Grandpa grasped tightly enough to lift him onto his broad shoulders. Noah remembers the smell of cigarettes and gas station coffee, of Stetson and sweat. He moves sluggishly down the stretch of highway and remembers Grandpa's finger pointing into the open distance toward the Rockies, holding his thighs tight so he wouldn't fall off of his shoulders, the orange sky yielding to the purple hues of dusk, Grandpa's scratching voice asking him,

“What do you see?”

Noah runs and runs and reaches the railroad tracks outside of Weston's limits. He hears a plane overhead soaring west in a lazy, droning stretch toward the mountains, leaving behind it the sound of vast, empty nothingness that echoes in his ears. Noah also hears the faint wail of an ambulance siren getting closer and he starts to panic. He looks down at the blood soaked through the front of his shirt and remembers why he is running. He falters for a second, dizzy, his head swinging in the direction of the sound. Noah slips, loses his balance, and falls backwards off of his bare feet and toward the gravel behind him. For a brief second the expanse of railroad track and empty, frosted grass surrounding it are replaced by a cloudless sky. This all yields to an overwhelming flood of stark black when Noah's head hits the ground with a heavy thump.

■

“You hungry, son?” Grandpa asks. “I put a few hamburgers on.”

Noah turns briefly to nod his head and goes back to looking at the walls. The furniture used to be bigger. He notices stacks of books and VHS tapes on the floor and shelves that hadn’t been there before. The one time that Noah did visit years before with Mom, the den was filled with family dressed in black and gathered at a card table grazing from a cheese tray.

“With ketchup,” he says without making eye contact as he pulls off his scarf and hat and throws them on top of Grandpa’s.

The old man nods at him and goes back into the kitchen. Noah takes off his gloves and stuffs them into his coat pockets. He picks up a picture frame sticking out from between the couch cushions and sits down, examining it using the glow of the television. Noah doesn’t really remember his grandmother when she was alive, but thinks she was pretty with her dark skin and hair. The only time he really remembers being in the same room with her was when she lay cold in a casket, her face looking shiny, almost waxen. Noah can hear the clank of a skillet in the kitchen. Grandpa comes back in and sees him holding the photo.

“That a picture of your grandma? She was one hell of a woman. Never seen her happier than the day at the hospital when you were born, you know.”

Noah nods his head.

“You’re still growing like a weed, son. How tall are you now, eight feet?”

Noah doesn’t laugh, but rather shrugs his shoulders without taking his eyes away from Grandma’s, her pupils the same jet-black color as the battered frame of his mother’s car.

Frowning at his grandson, John turns on the overhead light and reveals stained, brown carpet and knickknacks lining the walls, mementos of bygone decades.

“You haven’t talked much since we left Parkman,” he says.

Noah puts the frame down next to him on the couch and kicks off his snow boots.

“Christmas is coming up.” John clears his throat. “But we don’t have to, you know, unless you want to—”

He pauses and fidgets with his bare ring finger, staring at Noah, wanting to say something, anything, consoling, something that a boy in his situation needs to hear. Instead, he tells him to put his boots by the front door, just like he would Noah’s father when he was a boy. Noah trudges out of the room and John puts his hands to his eyes, sighing. The boy comes back with a VHS tape in his hand.

“What’s the adventures of Duke Ford and Little Basket?” Noah asks.

“Huh? It’s a TV show. Your Grandma and me watched that a lot when it was on, back when TVs had knobs.”

“Oh. What is it?”

Noah takes off his coat and sits down on the couch again. John clears off the spot next to him and sits down.

“What’s it about, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s a Western. You know, Cowboys and Injuns. Duke is a cowboy and he fights bad guys.”

“What kind of bad guys?”

“Robbers. People who steal from banks and trains.” John takes a breath. “Look, Noah, we should probably talk.”

“We are talking. Why doesn’t he wear a mask? You remember that Ranger guy when I was little? He wore a mask.”

“Well, Duke doesn’t have any family. He don’t need to hide. Noah—” John hesitates. “We’re gonna get you set up here for the time in the den. I’ll clear out that back bedroom and we can move all your stuff in there tomorrow.”

“Is it hard to ride a horse?”

“Noah, you listening to me?”

“I’m gonna live in the den till I get my own room,” Noah replies. “Is it hard to ride a horse?”

“No, it’s not hard. I’m real proud of the way you’ve been. You don’t need to act so grown up with me, son. It’s okay if you’re, uh—you know, if you need to tell me anything.”

“Can we watch it, Grandpa?”

John exhales through his teeth. “Yeah, put it in the machine there.”

He looks at Noah moving toward the television and thinks about the boy’s mother and how nice of a kid she was. John hasn’t seen his grandson in a few years, Illinois being one hell of a drive, especially this time around with the unforgiving snow. He thought the boy was nine but he must be ten by now. He looks scrawny, almost underfed; brown like his grandmother. She never liked being called “brown.” She found it insulting. So, John always called her “brownie,” affectionately. It’s a private joke that still makes

him smile, years after she's been put in the ground, even more years after their son abandoned Noah and the boy's mother for drugs or tail or God-knows-what-else.

He begins to speak, but Noah turns up the volume loud. John rubs the gray scruff on his chin and stretches out his aching legs. Noah sits down in front of the television, stretching his legs out as well, playing with his toes.

"This was always my favorite part here," John says, leaning his head back and sighing.

A rousing voice and orchestra boom through the television. "Last week, on *Duke Ford and Little Basket*, our heroes witnessed a train robbery by none other than Black Jack Ketchum and his Hole-in-the-Wall Gang!"

The camera pans to Duke Ford, triumphant in his white, ten-gallon hat and navy blue ascot, facing the audience and shouting, "We're gonna getcha, Black Jack! An' when we do, you'll hafta answer to more than just the Law!"

A dazzling horse chase ensues. Little Basket, chubby with dark, deep-set Apache eyes, prepares his bow in pursuit of Black Jack and his men. John stretches out his feet and his toes pop. He rubs his round belly and pulls his shirttails from his pants. His eyes become heavy and the bodies on the television screen become blurs. The smell of smoke slowly drifts and lingers in the room and reminds John that he wants a cigarette. Beeping comes from the kitchen.

John perks up. "Shit!" he yells, picking himself up from the couch and running toward the sound.

Noah stands, wavering, as if to follow. John mumbles a few fucks under his breath. He comes back out of the kitchen, still lucid and a bit disoriented. The front of his

shirt is black with the remains of burnt hamburger. John brushes his shirt. He looks at Noah and sees for the first time since Parkman, since the funeral, since the drive, a smile.

■

A train wails in the distance and the sleeplessness creeps up on John like a virulent mistress. He thinks of supper and smirks. The thought is replaced by his daughter-in-law's sunken, misshapen face, put together with some kind of putty. John then thinks about Noah, asleep in the den, and starts to feel the familiar despair clawing its way up his gut and into his chest, forming a lump in his throat, and he swallows hard to choke it down. He closes his eyes.

Earlier in the day, when they'd first arrived, John put some effort into shutting the heavy door that drug across the carpet. Noah stood in front of him. The boy was bundled from head to toe, clutching a small duffle bag in his even smaller fist. The living room was dark and only modestly lit by a pale yellow beam from a street lamp just outside of the picture window. The wind furiously beat upon the glass, bringing with it fat clusters of ice and snow.

John opens his eyes. He lies awake in bed and stares at the web of straight lines between the ceiling tiles, a blue glow cast upon them from the alarm clock at his side. Running his tongue across his teeth, he feels each one. A tingling starts in his nose. His eyes well up. He closes them.

John started to say something but Noah proceeded into the dark of the living room and bumped into a tall stack of newspapers that crashed and littered the floor. "Watch your step, son," John said, his voice low. "I haven't got a chance to clean up yet." The boy followed the soft white glow coming from the darkened den where the television had



been left on. A small screen set in the middle of a large, embossed wooden box, the volume was muted, a man and woman dancing happily across their ballroom in brilliant silver and black. The bandstand behind them played unheard music.

He opens his eyes. He clutches the sheet and lets it go. He clutches it. He lets go. John's hand cramps after a while and he stretches it out. He lets the seizure work its way to his wrist, then it fades and he closes his eyes.

"Forgot to turn the damn thing off," John said with certainty, trying to convince himself more than Noah. "Been gone for a week now." He bent over and set Noah's duffle bag and another suitcase down on the carpet in front of the flower-patterned couch, the arms stained with sweat. Standing up with care, he took off his gloves and jacket and threw them onto the wicker rocking chair at his side. His movements were habitual, something he still possessed from the days of working late shifts, his clothes saturated with smoke. And as if his wife were still alive, asleep in the adjacent room, he took large, even steps through the den and dining room, into the kitchen.

John finally keeps his eyes closed.

"We'll get the rest of your stuff from the car tomorrow," he called back to Noah while lighting the stovetop. He came back to find the boy standing in the middle of the den, his scarf still constricted around his mouth and his hat still resting just above his eyes. The television glow flickered on the wood-paneled walls like a white flame. Stacks of books and VHS tapes scattered amongst the floor and tabletops built a makeshift wall that blocked the west doorway of the den, leading to the bedrooms. He decided against putting the boy in the guest room and instead pulled a pillow and blanket from the closet, tossing them onto the couch.

John rolls over on his stomach and takes in a long breath. The cool of the pillow is comforting and the blue of the alarm clock lulls like an opiate light reflecting from a clear, warm pool. He feels himself slowly spinning and his muscles relaxing. The tension releases his neck, his temples, lets go of his throat and brow, and John gives up, keeping his eyes closed, succumbing to sleep.

■

A veil of ice, inauspicious, coats the black road. The station wagon's wheels slide on the slick pavement. Grandpa curses under his breath as he barely stops at the intersection. He mutters to himself and stares ahead, burning holes in the windshield. The radio is off and the night hums. Noah looks out of the passenger window at the few houses lining the street. Lit up in brilliant greens and reds, he imagines children behind the decrepit walls, running room to room, their mothers reading a magazine in front of a fireplace, perhaps knitting a sweater, their fathers watching the news. A fence behind one of the houses barely stands guard of the backyard. A nude woman in spray paint silhouette rubs her nipples. Noah wipes the fog of his breath off the window and looks up above the houses and street lights at the moon floating listlessly in a tar sky.

The winding church drive is bordered on the left and right by an intricate trail of empty milk jugs with large holes cut in the top. They house candles and protect the quivering flames lighting a path. Grandpa pulls up behind a line of cars waiting to turn into the entrance. A marquee above the front doors of the church, which Grandpa says once stood as a movie theater twenty years before, warns that there are eleven days until Christmas. The old man hand cranks his window down and hands a few dollars to a woman holding a white bucket. Bundled in a heavy coat, she stands as still as a

permanent fixture in the earth, her breath hanging about her like small clouds creating an atmosphere above her head.

“What is this called?” Noah asks Grandpa.

Grandpa remains silent for a moment, rubbing his chin. “A living nativity,” he responds.

“Oh.”

“These people are showing scenes from the Bible.” Grandpa starts to rub his ring finger. “Your grandma dragged me out to this every year.”

“When I was little?”

Grandpa doesn’t answer. “Too damn cold for this. These people must be freezing.”

They pull up in front of the first display. Inside of a makeshift wooden manger, Mary and Joseph crowd around a plastic baby Jesus. They stand still but Noah can see their breath. Floodlights in front of them shine on their faces, both unmoving until one coughs or another fights the mucus trailing toward her upper lip. A wooden sign sits in front of the scene on an easel.

Noah looks it up and down, beginning to read aloud. ““For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Cow—Cownsler, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will—”” he stops.

““Reign,”” Grandpa says.

““*Reign* on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and right—””

““Righteousness.””

““From that time on and forever.””

They approach the second scene and sit for a while.

“The last supper,” Grandpa mumbles. “See that guy there? That’s supposed to be Judas. And that’s Petrus.”

Judas coughs and Petrus stumbles a bit before finding his balance again. Grandpa turns to stare out of his window and a car pulls up close behind him, practically touching his bumper.

“Grandpa,” Noah says. He nudges the old man’s leg.

Grandpa mumbles something and drives on.

They stop in front of the final scene depicting a crucified Jesus hanging on a cross ten feet tall, his arms spread at his sides and tied by the wrists while he stands on a platform jutting from the center beam. His head is dripping with stage blood, his eyes open and looking tired. A crown of twigs sits crooked on his head. A wind picks up and the cross starts to move. His beard blows toward his ear and becomes detached from his smooth chin. Noah notices his lips quivering.

“He’s staring at me,” Noah says.

Grandpa points his glassy eyes toward Noah. “No, he’s not.”

“Too damn cold for this,” Noah mimics.

“Show some respect,” Grandpa replies.

They both sit, the car idle.

“You know what Christmas is about?” Grandpa asks after a few moments.

Noah remains silent, licking his chapped lips. “Santa.”

“Santa?” Grandpa replies, his voice rising. “Noah, we celebrate Christmas ‘cause we’re remembering the birth of Jesus who died for our sins.”

“I didn’t sin,” Noah replies.

Grandpa furrows his brow. “Yes, you did. Everyone sins, son. From the minute you were born you sinned. We all did.”

“He’s cold.”

Grandpa shakes his head. “Noah, listen. Christmas is not about presents or Santa Claus. It’s about Jesus Christ.”

Noah nods his head in the direction of the cross. “That Jesus?”

“Yes, that Jesus! Didn’t your mom teach you any of this?” Grandpa’s breath becomes labored. He rubs his ring finger frantically.

Noah hesitates. “No.”

The wind continues to blow and picks up. Christ’s cross creaks loud enough that Noah can hear it with the windows up.

Grandpa points his forefinger toward the display. “You see how he’s covered in blood? That’s because he got beaten and hung up on that cross.”

Noah cocks his head. “Why?”

“To die for our sins.”

“Why did he have to die?” Noah slouches forward, genuinely perturbed. “I didn’t do anything bad enough for him to get killed. No one did. Not when they were babies.”

“Noah—”

“What could a baby do to get a guy killed like that?”

Grandpa rubs the back of his neck. “Noah, that’s not what I mean. God wanted him to die.”

Noah’s eyes go wide. “*God* wanted him to die?”

“Yes, his father. And Jesus is the father of all of us.”

Grandpa turns to the driver’s side window.

“Kind of like you,” Noah says.

Grandpa shoots him a glance. “What?”

“You’re my dad’s dad but you’re also like my dad since my real dad left.”

Grandpa stares at Noah, his lips parting. He exhales. “Jesus died to pay for our sins. He did that as a sacrifice. He was happy to do it.”

Noah squints his eyes in question. “Happy to die? He was happy to die because his dad wanted him to do it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s stupid!”

“Noah.”

“No! That’s stupid! He looks stupid! He’s in his underwear! I wouldn’t die in my underwear because you told me to!”

Grandpa slams his fat fist on the dashboard. The plastic parking pass hanging from the rearview mirror rattles against his hollow blow. “Goddamnit, Noah, show some respect!”

Noah becomes quiet, looking down at his wet boots, his face feeling hot. The same car honks behind them and Grandpa speeds off toward the end of the drive. As they turn onto the street, the wind knocks Jesus from his platform.

“Son of a bitch!” Christ screams.

He hangs from his wrists, writhing, kicking his bare feet. Noah points at him excitedly and starts to say something to Grandpa, who doesn't take notice. The old man, mumbling under his breath, turns on the radio, drowning the silence.

■

Bodie sits inside of Ringo's Trading Post, planted firmly in his favorite red leather booth and sipping insipid coffee from a sticky mug. The dining room is void of any sound save the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. Short and plump, he strokes his unruly moustache and tugs at the silver ponytail hanging from the back of his balding head. He rubs his calloused hands on his stiff jeans and brushes cigarette ash from his chest. John sits across from him and stares at the bottom of his empty mug, his eyes heavy.

“Sure cold outside,” Bodie says to John, his voice a harsh, smoky rasp.

John clears his throat and nods.

“Helluva thing, John.”

“Yeah,” he sighs in return.

Bodie stares at his hands. “And the funeral?”

“Noah kept it together for the most part. He's been through hell already.”

“Yeah, yeah. I hear ya.”

“My son walked out on him and his mother few years back.”

“I know.”

“He's got no one else.”

“And the drive?” Bodie asks, looking John in the eyes as if genuinely interested.

“Took almost five hours longer than it should’ve with all the snow.”

Bodie nods silently. “You plan on...I dunno, adoptin’?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, yer the next of kin, right? Where else is the boy s’posed to go?”

“Not sure yet. I’m talking to a lawyer now, trying to get all this sorted out.”

Bodie hesitates. “What about yer daughter? Connie? She know yet?”

“No way of telling. Probably not.”

“You don’t got a phone number or somethin’?”

“No.”

“Lots of people are carryin’ cell phones these days.” Bodie fishes a black, plastic clamshell from his front pocket and sets it on the table, display-side up. “Hell, I even got one.”

John shrugs off the suggestion. “I don’t have a number, Bodie.”

“Just thought she should know if she don’t. If my sister-in-law died—”

“I know, Bodie,” John cuts him off.

Bodie starts to draw with his forefinger on the frosted window at his left. “How was Christmas?”

“Quiet. Noah didn’t have a lot. I scraped together what I could. He mostly slept.”

“Well, yer livin’ off social security, John.”

John sighs. “Yeah.”

“And if you were twenty years younger—”

“I know.”

“I’ll be in your shoes ‘fore too long.”



“You’ll know what it’s like when you get here.”

“Sixty’s not exactly twenty, ya know.”

“I’d kill to be sixty.”

Bodie laughs. “You remember Donny? He started right before you left.”

“Yeah, think so.”

“Guy pulled his groin out at the plant. I’m pullin’ double-duty for this asshole all month.”

“Pulled his groin?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t know how someone could manage to get themselves hurt doing that.”

“Me either. I pull mine every night and it doesn’t bother me none.”

They both laugh.

John shuffles in his seat, swiveling toward Noah who is pacing amongst the beaten shelves in the latter half of the large, open room, what’s deemed the consignment shop or “antique store.” On the diner side, Bodie whistles toward Noah. The boy pretends not to notice and noses through a cardboard box of comics.

“Hey!” Bodie yells across the room. Noah perks up. “C’mere a minute, would ya?”

The boy drags his feet toward the booth.

“Whatcha up to?” Bodie asks.

“Nothin’.”

“Why don’tcha come over here a minute.”

Noah looks at John.

“Don’t be shy, boy,” Bodie beckons. “C’mere.”

Noah stands next to the booth.

“Pull that chair up here.”

Noah drags a chair from an adjacent table over to the booth and sits down, the metal legs making a high-pitched squeal on the floor that breaks the silence in the room.

“How old are you, Noah?”

Noah seems to ponder the question. “Ten.”

“Ten years old? Wow.”

“Not quite, Noah,” John teases, a forced grin inching its way across his face.

“Well, nine and three quarters,” Noah replies matter-of-factly.

“Ain’t that somethin’,” Bodie says.

“What’s your name again?” Noah asks.

“Bodie.”

Noah adjusts his shirt and kicks his legs. “What kind of name is that?”

Bodie laughs. “You tell it like it is, huh? I never much liked it, neither. It’s short for Bodaway.”

“I’ve never heard of that name before.”

“Well, I’ve never met anyone named Noah. I’ve also never seen an ark.”

John laughs.

“What’s wrong with your eyes, Bodie?” Noah asks.

“My eyes?”

“Yeah. You’re always closing one like you look like you’re gonna sneeze or something.”

John and Bodie laugh, gravel deep in their throats.

“Yer all right, kid,” he says, wiping his chin. “I think this is gonna work out just fine.”

■

Late into the evening, Noah creeps toward the television and turns it on. The bulb pops into life and he adjusts the volume knob in a frantic haste, hoping he doesn't wake Grandpa and, in turn, bear witness to the old man's lucid string of cursing that will ensue. Noah's gut lurches with each phantom creak of the floorboards in the hallway at his side. He shuts the door to the den, but just enough so that he can still keep an eye on Grandpa's bedroom. Noah puts the tape into the large VCR and sits down on the floor, crossing his legs.

A white text fades in on the black screen.

*Near the southern border of the state on scenic Colorado 12 is the sleepy village of Weston. A rough, rowdy town in the 1800s, Weston boasted five saloons, general stores, and a jail that was overly crowded.*

A panoramic view of the town appears on screen. The ramshackle buildings, made up of general stores, a bank and hotel, sit side by side in a strip, boarded up and missing signs. The wind knocks an errant shutter around in the distance. A horse whinnies. A tumbleweed rolls across screen from the left to the right.

A solitary gunshot rings out.

The few people roaming the main road scurry toward the saloon while holding their hats to their heads and taking care to round up their women. One man jumps into an empty barrel. Another finds safety in a pile of hay. A carriage and a couple of stragglers

left behind make way for a brilliant blaze of gunfire and mounted bandits that are chasing Duke Ford on his white stallion. Duke looks over his shoulder and fires his ivory-handled .45 toward the thick cloud of dust and debris behind him, his face a well-molded sculpture of symmetry and a dry brow. The door to the den creaks open and Grandpa walks in, his face a mess of sleep. He rubs his whiskers and yawns.

“Is that new mattress uncomfortable?” he asks Noah.

“No,” Noah responds.

“Just can’t sleep, huh?”

“No.”

Grandpa yawns again and smacks his lips. “Hell. Me either. I figured I’d walk in here and catch you watching a nudie.”

Noah immediately shakes his head. “I had a bad dream. That’s why I came in here.”

He shuffles to the couch and falls into the cushions. The springs pop underneath.

The television screen fades to black and white text appears.

*Las Animas County takes its name from the Mexican-Spanish name of the Purgatoire River, “El Río de las Animas Perdidas en Purgatorio.”*

“What’s that say?” Noah asks, turning to Grandpa and pointing to the bit in Spanish.

Grandpa scratches his round belly. “Oh hell, I dunno, Noah. I don’t have my glasses on. El reeo day animals perdidass, something.”

The text fades and a new line appears on the screen as the orchestra, emphatic, rolls into a hearty crescendo.

*The Adventures of Duke Ford and Little Basket: River of the Lost Souls in Purgatory!*

“Killin’ me will take more than a lick an’ a promise, boys!” Duke yells at the masked riders.

One of the horsemen rides up alongside Duke and points his pistol at the back of the hero’s groomed head. An arrow pierces the antagonist’s back, sending him from his horse and onto the dusty ground below. Little Basket appears in the distance. Armed with a bow, presenting a shrill battle cry, he rides into the crowd, letting off a string of arrows that send a few more bandits toward the dirt.

“I was jus’ ‘bout to copper a bet, LB!” Duke yells at Little Basket.

“You like this show, son?” Grandpa asks.

Noah turns around and nods his head.

Grandpa stands up without responding and shuffles through the den toward his bedroom.

“What was your dream about?” he calls back after a few moments.

Noah starts to respond but stops. Grandpa enters the den with a straw cowboy hat in his hand and Noah smiles.

John looks down, horse reflections dancing across his face. The boy stands up and moves toward the couch. John follows and they sit down together. Noah crosses his legs and holds them. John places the hat on the boy’s head, crowning him with a dusty relic.

“Is it real?” Noah asks.

“A real cowboy hat from Texas.”

“Like Duke’s?”

“Just like Duke’s”

The Texas ten-gallon sits forward on his head, close to his eyes, the brim lined in blue plastic to accent the star in the center of the high crown.

“Thanks, Grandpa,” Noah says.

“You’re welcome,” John responds, knowing full well that the hat was made in China, Vietnam, maybe Korea, and bought somewhere upstate at a flea market for his son when he wasn’t much older than Noah.

They sit together for a while until the boy falls asleep. He rests against John’s arm, which goes numb. John thinks about moving but hesitates. He looks at Noah, put together so much like his grandmother, like his father, full of potential and possibility. He wonders where he went wrong with his own son, how the boy’s blood could have become so vile that it poisoned his heart.

Duke squats on his haunches in front of a fallen bandit. Lying on the ground, Duke grabs the man by his collar and pulls tight. “I’m lookin’ for Black Jack Ketchum. Who’re you ridin’ with, son?” he yells, punching the man square in his masked jaw.

The bandit lifts the bandana from his face far enough to spit into Duke’s.

“LB! Fetch me an arrow.”

Little Basket hands the arrow to Duke, who presses its point against the bandit’s bare throat.

“Yer a goner if you don’t get a wiggle on.”

“Jes do it, you mudsill.”

He pushes the point further, breaking the bandit’s skin.

“Lemme tell you somethin’, son. I can let you live if you jus’ tell me who yer ridin’ with. I’ve already shot all the other men with you.”

“Rot in Hell.”

“Way I see it, you have two ways of lookin’ at it. You can beat the devil round the stump, or you can tell me who yer ridin’ with. My Injun friend here is mighty keen on takin’ scalps. LB, show this gentleman yer tomahawk.”

“I ain’t tellin’ you nothin’.”

Duke pulls the bandana from the man’s face. “Who’re you ridin’ with?”

He punches the man, drawing blood from his nose and mouth.

“You son of a bitch.”

“Who’re you ridin’ with?!”

The bandit chokes on his red-orange blood, coughing and sputtering it up, the thin liquid running down his chin.

“I will take your life just as fast as I can give it to you!”

“I’m ridin’ with Ketchum!”

“Who?!”

“Ketchum! Black—Jack—Ketchum.”

■

John hovers above the plastic receiver and answering machine sitting on a small table next to the kitchen entrance. He picks up his address book. Bound in black leather, he undoes the clasp and pries the pages apart. They’re worn and yellowed, saturated with years of oil from moistened fingers. To his right, the clock’s determined second hand moves with deafening clicks. The sound fractures the tangible silence in the cold house.

John turns to the c's and finds her name. He stares at it, tracing the curved lines of his late wife's handwriting marked with perfect loops and elegant tails. He runs his finger over the page, feeling the imprint left by the pen that was once held in Faith's hand. He takes in a deep, labored breath through his clogged nostrils.

"Connie," he says quietly to himself.

John looks at the clock. He knows it's too late to call. But if she doesn't answer, however, he can leave a message. Just one message.

Connie, your sister-in-law is dead.

Connie, this is your father. I have some bad news. Your sister-in-law passed away.

Connie, your sister-in-law passed away and I have Noah.

Connie, this is Dad. Noah's fine, but your sister-in-law passed away.

Connie, I'm too fucking old and feeble to raise another child by myself and I'd appreciate it if you crawled out of that fucking hole and acknowledged your family you selfish little bitch.

Connie, where is your brother?

John puts the address book on the table and goes into the den.

■

Bodie folds the top corner of his open newspaper and looks over it toward the counter at his right.

"How much for pie?" he asks.

"Two seventy-five," Ringo responds.

"Yer shittin' me?"



“I wouldn’t think of it.”

“Jesus H. Why so much?”

“I dunno. Blame the economy.”

“I ain’t gonna blame the economy. The economy’s fine. I should blame yer cheap ass. Fuckin’ two seventy-five for a piece of pie.”

John chuckles as he sips his coffee.

“That shit should be free, as much as I’m in here,” Bodie says.

“You like blueberry?” Ringo asks.

“No. What other kinds you got?”

“Apple. Peach. Key lime.”

“Gimme apple. Nothin’ more American than apple pie. Warm it up too, would ya?”

“You want coffee?”

“Fuck yes I want coffee! Unless yer chargin’ me for that, too.”

“Coffee’s always free, Bodie.”

“Why can’t you pay for coffee?” John asks.

“Why should I pay for coffee?” Bodie replies. “I funnel so much of my money into this place, least that cocksucker could do is give me a little incentive.”

“It’s not like I can’t hear you,” Ringo calls over the counter.

“Go fuck yerself,” Bodie returns.

All three men laugh in unison.

“A man should work for his coffee,” John says.

“I work!” Bodie exclaims.

“Then why is it I see your ass planted in that booth more than eight days a week?”

“Some talk for someone on social security.”

“I’m old!”

“So no one should enjoy any benefits till they’re old as the dirt on the ground, huh? Is that what yer tellin’ me?”

“Pretty much.”

“Too old to fuckin’ enjoy it?”

John nods his head. “Yup.”

“What about welfare?” Ringo asks.

“A man should work,” John responds.

“What if he can’t? What’s he supposed to do then, huh?” Bodie asks.

“I dunno.”

“What if a man like myself can’t get his fat ass up outta this booth? If I can’t move, then I can’t work, which means I can’t pay for coffee.”

Ringo laughs. “And?”

“And,” Bodie continues, “I’m stuck in this asshole’s diner.” He points a chubby finger at Ringo. “Shouldn’t he help me out, seein’ as how I’m his responsibility?”

“I’d boot your fat ass out, paralyzed or not,” Ringo says, stepping toward the table with the pie and steaming coffee. He sets it down and walks back, repositioning himself behind the counter. John chuckles and throws back the last bit of his coffee from its water-stained mug. One of the fluorescent lights behind them has gone out and the room is only half-lit by the bit of sun coming through the window blinds.

“A man should work. A man should provide. If he can’t get out and work with his hands, well then, he should find another way to provide.”

“Hell, John, we should all sell vacuums over the phone!” Bodie responds, emphatic, throwing his hairy hands up into the air and dropping his newspaper onto the tile at his feet. He clears his throat violently and spits into a napkin.

“If that’s what it takes,” John replies.

Bodie slams his fist on the table. “Un-fuckin’-believable!”

“What?”

He drops his fork onto the plate. “Ringo! This pie’s cold!”

“I won’t charge you,” Ringo responds.

“I can see that shit-eatin’ grin underneath that Paul fuckin’ Bunyan beard. And no, you won’t,” Bodie responds, mumbling quietly to himself, picking up his paper and finding his place. “Charge me for cold pie, motherfucker, I’ll tell you what, I—”

John reaches for Bodie’s plate from across the table and starts to eat what’s left of the pie. Bodie mumbles under his breath behind the folds of the newspaper.

“What?” John asks.

“What’s with all the plane crashes?” Bodie asks.

“What’d you mean?”

“Says here that the AP reports Kenya Airways Flight four thirty-one crashed off the coast of kohtay de levore, or somethin’, into the Atlantic Ocean on Sunday, killing one hundred sixty-nine.”

“Huh.”

“And then it says here that the AP reports Alaska Airlines Flight two sixty-one crashes off California coast into Pacific Ocean, killing eighty-eight.”

“Think they had female pilots?” John asks, smiling to himself and finishing the last of the pie, licking cinnamon filling from his index finger and thumb.

“Hell, I bet there are men who’re capable of crashing a plane.”

John hears the high-pitched squeal of school bus brakes and the humming of an engine from outside. He pries open two slats of the blind at his right with his wet fingers.

“Noah’s here. Watch your language, huh?” he says to Bodie, not taking his eyes away from the school bus.

Bodie grunts and turns a page in his newspaper. “Yeah. Sure. Whatever you say.”

Noah stands with his back to the driver, his hands dug in his pockets, and faces the door. It’s forced open. He steps down and catches his toe as soon as he reaches the pavement. Noah falls forward onto his stomach and palms. Large granules of blue salt embed his cheek and the bus hums, emitting a horseglove odor. Grandpa bursts out the front door of Ringo’s.

“You all right, son?” he calls, lumbering down the walk.

“I’m okay,” Noah replies, brushing rock from his bloodied palm onto his pants.

“You’re getting blood on your jeans, Noah!”

Grandpa pauses, as tall as a tower, and looks down at Noah, who can feel the familiar sting in his nose as his eyes begin to well up.

“It’s all right, son. Let’s get you cleaned up. Come on,” Grandpa says as he puts his hand on Noah’s back to usher him inside. Noah uses his hand to wipe a stray tear from his cheek.

“I’m fine,” he says.

Grandpa rubs in between Noah’s shoulder blades. “I know, son. I know you’re fine.”

They step inside and Bodie turns around in his seat. The leather cushion squeaks underneath his heft. “Hey there, bud! What’s wrong?”

“Fell down,” Grandpa responds.

“I’m okay,” Noah says, holding and pressing his palm, watching tiny pools of red rupture from the scratches.

“You have any Band-Aids?” Grandpa asks the man behind the counter.

“Sure, John. How many?”

“Two.”

“You want anything?” Grandpa asks Noah. “Hot chocolate? Sodie pop?”

Noah looks to Bodie, who winks. “Coffee.”

Grandpa chuckles, the gap in the side of his teeth flashing pink with the movement of his tongue.

“You don’t want coffee,” he says.

“I wanna try it,” Noah pleads.

“Hell John, let the boy have some coffee!” Bodie yells across the diner, his eyes locked on his newspaper.

“Here ya go, John,” the man says to Grandpa as he hands him the bandages. “You want coffee for the boy?”

Grandpa smirks. “Sure.”

They walk back to the booth. Noah throws his backpack into the seat across from Bodie and slides in toward the wall. Bodie rubs his raw nose, his right eye bulging from his head in juxtaposition with his closed left.

“How was your day, son?” Grandpa asks.

“Well, I fell, and that sucked,” Noah responds. Bodie grins.

“Where’d you learn to say that?” Grandpa asks.

The man brings the mug of coffee to the table.

“Cream or sugar?” he asks.

Noah gives Grandpa a blank look.

“Do you want to make it sweeter?” Grandpa asks Noah.

“Sweeter?” Noah asks.

“Easier to drink.”

“Do you like it sweet?”

“No. Black.”

“Okay. That’s how I want it, too.”

“All right, chief,” the man says to Noah. “Your call.”

Noah takes a sip, holding the mug with both hands. He cringes and rubs his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Gross!” he spits.

John laughs and scratches his head behind his ear. His watch glistens in the sunlight coming from the window. He smooths back the bit of gray hair remaining on his head.

“Hey!” Bodie yells, his left eye emerging from behind its fat eyelid as his right eye shuts tight, like the lazy blinking of an inflated bullfrog. “That is a holy drink and this is a holy place!” He looks to John.

“You don’t have to finish it if you don’t want to, Noah,” Grandpa responds.

“You want it?” Bodie asks Noah.

Noah ponders the idea. “Nah, you can have it.”

Bodie thrusts his hand toward the mug and drinks the coffee in three long swigs.

“Tastes better than whiskey,” Noah says, trying to speak loudly, not looking at either of the men but instead playing with the zipper on his heavy coat.

“Whiskey?” Grandpa shoots. “When the hell’d you have whiskey?”

Noah senses the anger rising in Grandpa and quickly becomes quiet. Bodie puts his paper down and looks at Noah.

“Answer your grandfather, Noah.”

“You’re not in trouble,” Grandpa says in a low, austere tone, as if the statement itself is to serve as a form of punishment.

Noah swallows and digs his finger into a rip in the leather seat. “Long time ago.”

“When?”

“When Mom was at work.”

Bodie clears his throat. “Bout supper time, don’tcha think, John?”

The corners of Grandpa's mouth hang slightly and his eyes become glossy in thought.

"John?" Bodie asks again.

"Huh? It's 3:30, Bodie."

Bodie points his forehead toward Noah.

"Yeah," Grandpa responds. He looks at Noah who hangs his head hung low, retreating into the bulk of his oversized coat. "You want a sandwich?"

Noah stares at the table. "Turkey."

"Cream soda?" Grandpa asks.

"What's that?" Noah asks.

"What's cream soda?!" Bodie exclaims. "Ringo! Get this boy a turkey sandwich and a cream soda!"

"Let's get those bandages on," Grandpa says, turning Noah's hand upright in his large, work-hardened paw.

■

Sometime around midnight, John lies on top of the covers, fully clothed and still wearing his shoes. Noah's snoring drifts down the hall. Beer bubbles in John's round gut and a wave of nausea picks up his pounding head, rocking it back and forth, back and forth. The invisible tide that moves his head rises high and reaches his shoulders, his chest, right up to his toes. It pushes and pulls back, forth, and back and forth. The sea is still in his bones.

It has never left him.



He closes his aching eyes and hears the crashing of white waves. He pulls lost orients and hidden treasures like faded polaroids from his memory. He pulls a picture of Faith. He lets it rest against the back of his eyelids. He scans every yellowed inch of the memory back and forth. Back. Forth. Faith's smile. Faith's dark eyes. Faith's supple lips and breasts and kind lines cornering her mouth. Iran. Iran in the background. A dog behind her. No, a boy behind her. And Iran. Faith smiling, hands at her sides. A boy on a bike. Iran. Faith in the foreground. A picture he'll never forget. A picture studied in his mind, time and time again, back and forth.

"You love me?"

"I do."

"Then put it inside."

"What do I do?"

"Move it back and forth."

Back and forth. The rising tide. The salt air. Faith wet and warm in his arms. A dirty room in Iran. A boy. A boy mauled by a dog. A hotel. Faith. The water takes his neck, his chest, his legs. It engulfs his face, invades his nose and throat. Burns his eyes. The sea has never left his bones. It's stayed with him. It's ebbed. Flowed. Back and forth.

Back and forth.

■

Look closer, son. What do you see?

An hour into the movie Noah starts to sweat, so he pulls off his coat one arm at a time and stuffs it into the folded seat at his right. Grandpa's bloated belly rests on his lap. It catches loose bits of popcorn that fall from his whiskered chin.

"Are we the only people in here?" Noah whispers.

Grandpa turns his head to his left and right. "Looks like it," he yells at the screen.

The old man swallows the last dregs of his soda and smacks his chapped lips.

"Can't

believe they put a nigger in this," he mouths.

Noah looks to Grandpa and then the empty seat in front of him. "Me neither."

Grandpa doesn't seem to hear his response, finishing the last of the popcorn. A fight scene begins onscreen. The speakers hanging from the theater walls crackle and whimper with wet-sounding punches, crunching wood and glass.

*"Never drum on a white lady's boobies at a big redneck dance. Got it."*

Grandpa laughs, throwing back his head. The bit of loose flesh hanging where his throat should be dances wildly. He bangs his paw on the plastic arm of his chair. His belly moves and ripples, little waves sliding their way up his torso. The pocket protector in his shirt moves with the rhythm of his chest. Noah looks to Grandpa for a moment, then back to the screen, and returns with a vacant laugh.

■

"Hey," the girl whispers at the back of Noah's head.

He continues to stare down at the worksheet on his gray desk, not really reading the words but appreciating them for their shape and size, occasionally lifting his pencil to fill in the circle space comprising an o, b, or a. Noah looks over his shoulder to his right,

noticing for the first time the hand-painted mural depicting gnomes in a bright green garden on the wall of lockers used to store the students' coats. Crude Valentine's Day hearts, cut out of pink and red construction paper, line the tops of the lockers.

"Noah?" The teacher interrupts herself, staving off a loud, nasally passage from the book in her hand. "Are you with me, bud?"

Noah can't remember her name, and doesn't know how old she is. She seems young, though, aged only by lines in the corners of her mouth and a faint scar on her temple, which starts at the end of her brow, travels toward her ear, and slides down a bit past her left eye. Noah also finds himself studying her heaving breasts, which stretch her orange sweater quite noticeably.

"Noah?" she asks again, agitation in her voice beginning to reveal itself.

"Yes," Noah answers, defeated. The girl behind him laughs.

"Naomi?" The teacher raises her voice, a rehearsed exercise and desperate attempt to assert her authority. The girl shuts down and Noah can feel her occasionally peeking up from her desk to look at the bit of vertebrae protruding underneath the skin of his neck. Noah fights his erection, tugging at the seam of his pants.

As soon as the bell rings over the intercom and the students are allowed to retrieve their coats and wads of paper valentines, Naomi approaches Noah at the lockers, the two of them blending into the mural like a couple of gnomes poised on the grass—stagnant, ceramic, locked in eternity.

"Noah," she says, the inflection of her voice coming across more as a question rather than a statement.

“What?” Noah asks. He spots a gap between her front teeth as she smiles and he becomes defensive.

Card in hand, she purses her lips, as if to kiss him. “Someone told me you have a dead mom and that’s why you moved here, right?”

Noah stares back at her, looking at the tufts of curly, red hair resting errantly on her forehead. Her pale, freckled face blurs as Noah’s eyes begin to well up. He bursts into tears that emanate from a place well known to him.

“Naomi!” the teacher exclaims, hitting her knee with a loud bang on the aluminum desk as she rushes from her swivel chair. To Noah’s excitement, her breasts bounce wildly as she grabs her knee and mouths a few shits. His sobbing is cut short by high-pitched laughter. Naomi joins him. Together, they both stand in stark juxtaposition with the two-dimensional creatures at their sides.

■

Late into the night, the fine hairs on Noah’s brow stand alert, clinging to the static of the bulbous television screen. He wrings his small hands together and presses his face closer to the glass. Noah allows the cold to penetrate his feverish skin, the brim of his hat pressed against the screen, tipping upward and falling backwards off of his head. It lands silent on the carpet between his feet. He pulls his wet palms apart and hugs the television with a ferocious slap. His fingers slide toward the back of the television and leave an impression in the dust clung to its sides. Noah presses his lips against the screen and it’s as if there is no distinction between his flesh and the glass.

His vision is enveloped by quick, flashing images. An orchestrated gallop of hollow hooves fills his ears, and when the screen momentarily goes black, Noah fears

he's gone blind. The light of a lone fire burning in the middle of a flat plain, which is sparsely outlined by a few dry, distorted trees, disrupts the darkness. A flicker of orange light reveals Little Basket perched like a plump bird on the remains of a fallen tree. The fire coughs and hacks an ember at his feet. He grunts to himself and slowly rotsisseries a small chunk of pink flesh hanging on the end of his crude, bloody knife.

A deep voice sounds from the darkness. "I knew men like Black Jack back in the war," Duke says, emerging quiet from the shadows to sit on an adjacent log. "Conmen like him would euchre an' take French leave, though I never pegged 'im fer bein' a killer."

Duke uses the toe of his decorated boot to draw lines in the dirt. He takes a spoonful of beans from the tin can at his side, careful not to let any fall onto his sturdy, clean-shaven chin. "Jus' last year he hit a post office fer forty-four dollars. Held up a train in Terrell County with that goddamned Hole-in-the-Wall Gang. Left a trail of death in his wake."

Little Basket grunts acknowledgment, pulling the smoking meat from the end of his knife. He dangles it above his pudgy mouth before quickly devouring it in a single gulp.

Duke thrusts his long arm above the flames toward Little Basket. "Tobacco?"

"The edn," Little Basket responds, solemn, taking the small burlap sack from Duke and packing tight his long, wooden pipe.

"He's plannin' somethin' big," Duke continues. He rubs his smooth chin and stares deep into the heart of the fire. "Ketchum's a flannel mouth! A damn gospel sharp!

Talked his way inta shootin' that rancher near Knickerbocker, remember? What was that, three years ago? 1894?"

"95," Little Basket responds.

"Men like Black Jack—," Duke pauses. He takes in a deep breath of cold air.

"Smart in a cunning, crafty sorta way. Strong physically, and sure enough deadly. Callous. Brutal."

"A coyote," Little Basket replies, looking up at Duke through a veil of smoke.

"Sitliden." He pulls another slow drag from his pipe and releases tight rings of smoke into the starred sky.

Duke severs his attention from the fire and stares out toward the dark plain, lit only by bits of silver moonlight shining through the gaps in a cluster of black clouds.

"Dreadfully much so," he responds. "A man's gotta have remorse. It's what makes him human." Duke considers this, finishing the last of his beans and tipping the brim of his stark white hat. "I'll tell ya in confidence LB, that war ruined me fer any woman. Saw things I ain't never dreamed about, even after bendin' an elbow bit too much. But more importantly, it bred men like Black Jack. I tell ya, pittin' a nation 'gainst itself, we all had to be a bit cunnin' to get by. Yer prolly too young to remember."

The powder caked around the corners of Duke's eyes makes visible a network of crow's feet.

"The people are tirin' of blood and thunder, LB. Black Jack ain't no Robin Hood."

Loud muffles sound from the near distance. To their left sits a struggling rider on a patient horse. A thick rope hangs from the branch above his head and is knotted around

his thin neck. Duke rises slowly, belches, and approaches the moaning rider, clad in crude flannel and sheepskin chaps. He pulls a woven sack off of the rider's head, revealing a dark man with sweat-matted hair stuck to his forehead, his amber eyes red and searing. He spits weakly into the dust at Duke's feet.

"Puedo sentir el diablo aquí, pero es demasiado tarde para huir," the rider mouths.

"Huh? Yer dragged out?" Duke asks the man.

"Sí," he responds, moaning soft, his eyes locked on the dark mane of the chestnut horse.

"Truthfully," Duke replies, "I don't care a goddamned continental."

Duke produces a rolled cigarette from behind his ear and lights it with the strike of a match against the horse's ragged leather saddle.

"Have any dinero?" Duke asks.

"Sí, está en mi alforja." The man is slow to respond, as if tasting each word and finding them to be bitter.

"LB!" Duke shouts behind him. "What the hell'd he say?"

Little Basket grunts back, disinterested in the exchange.

Duke sighs and searches through the man's pockets and saddlebags. He fists a few crumpled notes found amongst some stale remnants of bread, then checks the rope binding the man's hands behind his back.

"Black—Jack," Duke states slow and matter-of-factly.

"No se," the man responds.

"Is he here? Near Weston?" Duke asks. He searches the man's hollow face, caked in dirt.

“No se,” he replies, biting his dry, cracked lip.

“Where?!” Duke yells in the man’s face.

He cringes against Duke’s hot breath. “No se, señor.”

Duke looks the man over and chucks the stub of his cigarette into the campfire.

The man hangs his head, resolved. “No se.”

Duke is quick, and in one fluid motion he replaces the sack over the man’s head and lays a heavy hand on the horse’s croup. It bucks, rising high into the night sky, searing and wild, and races off into the darkness. The branch threatens to snap under the weight of the man’s flailing body, his bare toes writhing, close enough to the ground to kick up a cloud of dust around him as he jerks and struggles for a length of time before slowing and tiring and settling.

Noah pulls his face from the television and falls back to the floor, massaging his sleeping legs.

■

“Is it dead?” Naomi whispers.

Noah nudges the tabby cat, using the toe of his muddy boot to pry its head from the cold road. Its thin, pink lips are drawn back sharply as it wheezes through a set of yellow teeth. When its head leaves the icy pavement, an errant patch of wet, bloodied orange fur is left behind, exposing the slick muscle of the cat’s jaw. Naomi steps back suddenly, pink gloves covering her mouth. Noah jerks his foot back and squints against the bright sunlight, a flutter in his stomach and chest.

“No,” he replies, shaken. “I think it’s still breathing.” He uses his teeth to pull off one of his heavy, blue gloves, putting two dirty fingers up to the cat’s mouth.



“Ew!” Naomi shrieks. “Don’t touch it! Just leave it on the road!”

“I can’t leave it, stupid!” Noah shoots back, his brow furrowed underneath the large brim of his cowboy hat. “It’s not human.”

“Humane,” Naomi corrects. “Stupid.”

Noah assumes an air of authority, his bare hand placed decidedly on his hip.

“Whatever. You should go home.”

He pulls off his other glove and shoves it into his unzipped coat pocket. With both exposed hands, he rubs the ghost stubble on his smooth chin, bending over to cradle the small cat, its soft belly stretched and bloated. It bellows, sounding frenetic.

“You’re not a cowboy!” Naomi shrieks, splitting her chapped lips in accusation. “No matter how much you think you are with that stupid hat! You don’t know anything about animals!”

Noah grits his teeth. His lips quiver. “Yeah? What do you know?”

“I think its back is broken, or something!” Naomi prances about the empty road, looking back and forth over her shoulders for cars. “C’mon, Noah! It’s almost lunchtime! My dad is going to freak out!”

He stomps to the edge of the road. “Then go home!” he yells back.

A guttural groan escapes the cat’s throat. Noah storms off. His boots clomp and he loses a bit of traction on the dark ice. Naomi trails behind. He can feel her pace quickening. They make their way toward the large expanse of abandoned housing development, snow-covered in far-flung patches. Remnants of a circle drive are apparent, partially hidden by the few visible tufts of tall grass. A worn sign promises affordable living for low-income families.

Noah notions toward the beginnings of a basement dug deep in the flat earth.

“There,” he says.

“What? What’re we gonna do with it?” she asks, her chest rising and falling.

“I dunno,” Noah responds. “Bury it?”

“No! With what? It’s cold, Noah. Just put it down. Please?”

Noah approaches the void, sticking his head over the edge, timid. “It’s full of ice,” he says. “We could break a hole and drown it.”

The cat’s gnarled rib cage heaves.

Noah sets it down in the dirt with utmost care and retrieves a cinderblock from a neat pile just a few feet away. Using both hands and bending his weak knees, he wobbles to the hole, the cinderblock held slightly above his waist and in constant danger of slipping from his grasp. With all of his might, he draws the cinderblock back between his legs and outward. It clumsily tumbles down the dirt slope and onto the thin ice, cracking the white, smoky veil like sugar glass. Murky water slushes underneath in small, undulating waves.

“The cat might float,” Naomi whispers, her glassy green eyes locked on the ground.

“Maybe we could tie it to one of those bricks,” Noah suggests.

Naomi stands rooted to the ground, her arms crossed and her chin tucked into the neat folds of her scarf. Noah searches for a length of rope, settling after a few moments on a thin coil of black wire. He wraps it tightly around the cat’s flank a couple of times, moving then to the cinderblock. The sharp greens of its empty eyes are bright and pointed toward him. It gasps as he massages its scruff.

“I’ll lift the brick and you can lift the cat,” he dictates.

“I’m not touching that thing,” she replies, looking to him in desperation.

“You can’t lift the brick, neither,” he states matter-of-factly.

“Yes I can!”

Naomi trudges toward him, taking up the weight in her gloved hands, looking visibly exasperated. Noah picks up the cat and together the two shuffle toward the edge of the hole.

“On the count of three?” Noah asks.

“One,” Naomi replies.

“Two.”

On three, they hurl the cat and cinderblock, both of which collide with the dirt and roll. The cat drags behind, bouncing and jerking and wailing as it hits the ice with a hard slap and is dragged down into the water. Naomi and Noah face the break in the ice, waiting. Noah, his face feeling hot, wipes his bloodied palm on the leg of his stained jeans. Naomi unsuccessfully stifles a sob. She rubs her freckled cheek with the back of her wrist, making a mess of her tears. As she turns around in retreat, the cat bobs to the surface. It screams something primordial, a loud, grating shriek, and paws frantically. Naomi shrieks and Noah rushes to the pile of cinderblocks, desperately hurling one after the other down the steep slope. Each block assaults the thin layer of ice, breaking it into glacial slabs which float apart and reveal darkness. One of the cinderblocks lands on top of the writhing cat and forces it beneath the surface, a tall gush of water rising high. Naomi struggles to catch her breath between violent sobs, bent forward with her hands on her knees. Noah drops, panting.

■

John decides that the smell, both sweet and acrid, is emanating from somewhere in the attached garage. He discovered it earlier in the morning, just before breakfast was in the toaster and Noah was off to school. At first, he apathetically noses through the piles of boxes, clothes, errant alarm clocks, soiled paperbacks, and rat shit that towers toward the ceiling, pushing against the large, white door of the garage entrance, which gives it, when viewed from the outside, an impregnated look. This shuffle, the lazy sifting of boxes, soon turns into a hunt. John, out of his robe and in worn jeans, painfully crawls on his hands and knees, flashlight in mouth, searching for the pungent, familiar stench. Sweat gathers on his brow and he has to stop in order to catch his breath. He can feel thick moisture pooling under the folds of his drooping chest and belly, bleeding through his collared shirt, running down his back and between his hairy legs. A snowplow trudges past the house, pushing a cold wind through the slightly open garage door that chills John, causing him to give up his search and head back inside.

Closing the door that leads from the garage to the kitchen, John shuffles past the washer and dryer on one side of the cramped room and makes toward the sink. He notices black skid marks his Velcro shoes have made on the thin, rose-patterned carpet over time. Grimacing, he takes his mug from next to the sink and drinks his cold, black coffee as if it is water. He reaches the bottom of the cup and eyes a thick ring built out of neglect. John sets the mug on top of piling plates and bowls. He turns, his belly knocking cereal boxes off of the crowded table that is pushed too close to the small countertop. Bending to pick them up, he spots a tangled mess of dust and cobwebs spun between the center leg of the table and the seat of Faith's chair.

John sighs for the first time in days.

Exiting the kitchen, he slowly passes the cordless phone situated on a table against the wall. He eyes its grimy receiver.

Back in the kitchen, John grabs a bottle of all-purpose cleaner, unaware of any expiration date, and moves toward the spare bathroom located in the den. He grabs a rag from beneath the sink, unsure of where to begin. After moving stacks of VHS tapes and magazines from one spot to another, he settles on hoarding them into a corner that was once occupied with his son's chair. John drags his rag across the top of the dusty television, working his way around the VCR and satellite receiver. He uses the toe of his shoe to rub away a dark spot on the carpet. Heaving, out of breath, he leaves the den and moves into the dining room, stopping to kneel in front of the back door that is made up of heavy, transparent glass. John casts a disengaged stare past the wooden deck and into the backyard, which is unobstructed by any fence or neighboring houses, allowing him a clear view of nothing, a flat plain of white, a perfect portrait of the heavy snow falling something short of graceful.

He picks up the cleaner and stares at the back of the bottle. "Glass," he mumbles to himself.

John focuses his tired eyes. He sees a worn picture of a countertop, followed by a wooden tabletop, then the upholstery of a couch, but no windows.

"Fuck," he mouths.

Struggling to squeeze the bottle's defiant nozzle, his rag is met with a mess of white foam. Pungent citrus attacks his nostrils and he coughs. John presses the rag to the middle of the door. He spots a child's handprint imprinted in the glass, situated near his

chest. It is as old as it is small and comprised of the crusted remnants of a once-sticky candy. John wonders if it is caramel. He feels the cleaner seeping through his thick fingers, trailing slowly down the window in large beads toward the handprint, and he hurriedly wipes the liquid away with his free hand, leaving a streak across the glass. John stares at the open palm. He follows the faint lines that start at the wrist and expertly dodge the thumb, the same succinct lines that led to her fingernails that day, which had not been clipped as Faith had suggested. They're stained a dark yellow from stabbing and tearing at the porous skin of a Florida orange that was bought at a farmer's market just blocks from the motel, brought to the beach in its red, plastic net. Connie greedily tears at the orange, digging her small thumbs into its soft surface and bringing it to her lips. She sinks a few baby teeth into the skin, errant grains of sand appearing dangerously close to her mouth. John wipes them away with the very tips of his fingers.

“Here,” he says, amused, motioning for the fruit that is covered in slobber.

Connie, her dark hair sticking in wet curls to her forehead, hands it to John, presenting it like a relic in her chubby, outstretched palms.

“Eat!” she exclaims.

John smiles and begins to expertly peel the orange. He hands its plump contents to his daughter and throws the rind far into the blue-green ocean that's rocking steadily back and forth, every few moments washing their naked feet that rest on the sand in front of them. A small plane saunters overhead, trailing a blue banner against the overcast sky.

“Look!” John motions with his forefinger toward the plane, his other hand shielding his aching eyes. He raises his voice to a comical decibel in an attempt to appear excited.

Uninterested, Connie drops her orange down the length of her swimsuit and picks up the plastic pail at her side. John brushes his hand on the leg of his wet shorts and runs his fingers through her thin hair, moving her bangs to one side. His throbbing shoulders remind him of the umbrella forgotten in their room and he inspects Connie's scalp with care for any burns. She looks up at him with her mother's amber eyes and shoves a fistful of sand into her mouth.

Within an hour, Connie is curled up on John's lap, her head resting against his bare chest. He picks her up in his tan arms and shuffles through the sand toward the wooden deck leading to the motel, the warm wind, which was a breeze earlier in the day, moving against them while the sky begins to sour, becoming black and bloated with rain. He reaches the yellow door of their room and fumbles in his pocket for the key. It makes a click in the doorknob, and as he enters the room he spots Faith lying in bed, asleep on top of the blankets, their son still in his bathing suit and nestled in a mess of pillows on the floor next to the bed. John thinks he looks small compared to his mother. Both of them appear to be exhausted from perusing the strip of shops within walking distance of the motel, sleeping with their mouths slightly ajar, drawing in loud, deep breaths. John unbuckles the clasps of Connie's shoes, removes her wet swimsuit, and wraps her in a cloth diaper, pinning the soft corners together. He sets her in the basinet, not bothering to coddle her in a blanket. John lies on the bed next to Faith, enjoying the warmth of her back against his torso. As his eyes begin to droop and the back of Faith's dark head becomes a blur, she turns over, gentle, as to not wake the boy.

"Can we go eat something fancy?" she whispers, her eyes half-open.

John's trance is rattled by raucous movement coming from somewhere in the garage. He begins to stand up but a hard, hot knot in his lower back keeps him rooted to the floor. John stares back at the handprint and remember how he maneuvered the pale yellow nose of their new '71 Ambassador around a row of parked cars. They pull into the only available space, set far away from the luring lights of the brightly lit restaurant. He steps out of the car and grabs Connie from the backseat, hoisting her up onto his broad shoulders, giving her a better, starlit view of the replica Spanish ship, impressive in its relative size and craftsmanship.

"Hey, you haven't said much tonight," John says to Faith as she steps out of the car in her loud heels, giving her full attention to the crowd filing in and out of the restaurant. She chews on her short nails.

"Hey!" John says again, his voice stern. She turns toward him, her dark eyes meeting his with an air of irritation in the incandescent light of the boat.

"What?" she snaps back.

John remains cool, fidgeting with the ring on his left hand. "I said, you haven't said much tonight. There a problem?"

Faith pauses a moment, as if pondering the question. Her weight shifts from heel to heel. "No."

"You sure?" he snaps back. "Because I'd hate to have to make you walk back to the motel in the dark."

"There's no problem, John."

"Panama City's pretty scary at night."

"I said there isn't a problem!" she pleads. "Can we just eat? Huh?"



He turns away from her, victorious. “We’re gonna eat on a boat, Jitterbug!” he says to Connie, her hands clasped securely in the tufts of his thick hair.

“Is that a real boat?” his son asks from beneath Faith’s hip. He tugs at his shirt collar and tight tie.

“Don’t mess with that. Yes, it’s a real boat,” John replies. “It’s supposed to be a treasure ship.”

“Wow!” the boy exclaims rather loudly.

John shoots him a glance. “Now don’t act up, or you’ll be sittin’ your ass in the station wagon till we’re done eating. Hold your mother’s hand.”

Faith uses her fork to divide the fish and rice into separate entities on the plate. The boy sits next to her in the brown leather booth, picking at the peeling, patterned wallpaper at his side. John breaks his last roll into halves, handing one piece to Connie and setting the other on his son’s half-empty plate. A jazz quintet plays in the back of the room. The trumpet player makes eyes at the waitress as she wiggles between close tables with a tray of drinks. He bursts into a Bill Chase number. A few people leave their chairs and begin to dance.

“You gonna eat?” John asks Faith, not taking his eyes away from his fat steak. After a moment of silence, he looks to her for a response.

“I’m not hungry,” she says.

“That’s an expensive fish you’ve got there,” he replies as he points to her plate with his upturned fork.

“We’ll take it with,” she says.

“We don’t have an icebox to put it in. Eat it, please.”

“I’m not hungry, John.”

John drops his fork and brings the green, cloth napkin from his lap to his mouth in one quick swipe.

“Ok, no problem, sweetheart” he responds. “Son? Hey, don’t pick at that! You want some of your mom’s fish that she’s too damn stubborn to eat?”

“I don’t like fish,” the boy replies, still pulling at the bit of loose, salmon paper.

“Ok. I’ll eat it,” John grunts, grabbing the heavy plate from across the wooden table, practically knocking over Faith’s glass of white wine. He stabs the orange filet with his fork and tears off a piece with his mouth.

“Is it good?” Faith asks, her painted, red lips pursed in anger. John fears she will cry.

He smirks in response. “Delicious.”

Faith leans back in her seat, out of the light above the table and into a shadow cast over her face and bare chest exposed by the deep cut of a dress bought years before their son was born.

“Where’s your friend?” the boy asks Faith, picking at his food with a forefinger and thumb.

“Nowhere, sweetheart,” she responds, placing a shaking hand on the back of his head.

“Friend?” John asks. “What’s he mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Son?” he asks. “Hey, stop eating a minute. What do you mean ‘friend?’”

The boy, blood rushing into his face, looks to his father and again to Faith, whose eyes are glazed from the wine and smoky haze in the room. The trumpet behind them wails. Connie throws a handful of mixed vegetables onto the carpeted floor beneath them. John crushes a pea under his foot.

“What’s he mean?” he asks, his voice quivering, genuinely perturbed.

“What does he mean?” he repeats, incredulous. “Who the fuck is he talkin’ about?”

“John,” she pleads. She looks around the crowded dining room.

“You think you can just lie to me?” he asks, his voice beginning to rise above the brassy scream. His throat becomes tight and he takes a long swig from the glass in front of him.

“No, I didn’t lie, I just—”

“Could’ve let me enjoy this fuckin’ vacation. I really wanted to enjoy this fuckin’ vacation.”

“John! Please, let’s talk when we get home.”

Connie grunts and grasps for John’s glass. He slides it across the table and smiles at her. She returns with a toothy grin as he stands up out of the booth.

“Where are you going?” Faith asks, tears beginning to form in the corners of her eyes.

“Piss,” John responds under his breath. The band follows the Chase number with “Moonlight Serenade.” Those couples that were dancing take each other up in arms.

John shoves open the heavy door with his fist. The brass handle hits the tiled wall behind it with a loud bang, cracking some of the porcelain. He stomps to the mirror, his

hands outspread on the pink countertop. He balls them into fists. John shakes lightly and looks into the mirror at the yellowed whites of his eyes, following his receding hairline down into the wrinkles on his forehead, through the gap between his eyebrows, down the veiny bridge of his flared nose, and into the lines cornering his eyes that move outward toward the edge of her palm-print and disappear into the clear glass.

He drops the rag onto the carpet and pushes himself up with the aid of his knee. In the process, John hits the bald crown of his head on the doorknob. He yells, bellowing as loudly as his aged throat allows, kicking over a chair and forcing it to bounce into the plastered wall.

■

The following Sunday they step inside the church and John asks Noah for his coat. The boy begrudgingly hands it to him, and John hangs it up on a metal rolling rack in the carpeted foyer. He forces collected clumps of snow from his shoes in two hard stomps.

“C’mon, son,” he urges, motioning for Noah and sounding a bit more stern than he would have liked. John tries to soften his tone, fighting the exasperation crawling its way into his flushed face. “C’mon. We’re late.”

Noah trudges behind, dragging his feet and scratching the back of his head frantically.

“I just combed your hair!” John snaps.

“It itches!” Noah pleads.

John catches the toe of his left foot on a track of torn carpet. “Jesus Christ! Noah, move your ass!”

He grabs the boy's wrinkled shirt collar and ushers him through the large, wooden double-doors. The hinges wail under the weight of the doors' massive bulk. A few sets of disinterested eyes shoot toward John and Noah standing at the entrance of the chapel. One woman shakes her head and turns back toward the pulpit. The preacher pauses momentarily before continuing his emphatic build up.

"I'm not making this up, people!" The collected mass, built of cream blazers and heads of tightly curled white hair, chuckles. John pulls Noah along by the arm of his shirt. He ducks toward the back of the impressive worship hall, finding his familiar wooden pew. They sit down and John slides his calloused palm across the cushioned seat, comforted by the well-known beige embroidered in elegant patterns.

"No, I'm not flying by the seat of my pants! I'm not selling you snake oil! It's in the good book! Luke fourteen, verse twenty-eight! Do you remember what it says?" The preacher points jokingly, accusingly, at the front row. "Sir, uh, Jim, right? Do you remember?"

An elderly man resting his eyes perks up and laughs back, "I sure don't, preacher!"

The crowd emits a few errant giggles. John squirms in the pew and adjusts the seat of his pants. Noah pulls at one of the collection envelopes in front of him and positions it on the back of a hymnal. He grips a pencil stub next to the envelopes and begins to draw.

The preacher looks over his glasses settled awkwardly on the bridge of his large nose. He produces a white handkerchief and wipes his brow. "You, ma'am, do you remember what it says?"

“What’s that, preacher?” a feeble voice rings out. Everyone laughs.

“Well everyone, let me tell you what it says, if not for your sake, at least for Jim’s.”

The crowd roars. John rests his chin on his fist and grapples with whether or not he recognizes the speaker. He spots the neighborhood girl a few pews closer to the pulpit, sitting with someone unfamiliar, perhaps her mother. Noah looks toward their direction and moves forward in his seat, as if to get up and greet them. John shoots the boy a glare and he settles back in the seat. The lead in his pencil breaks and he grunts, using his index finger to shade the steel muzzle of a pistol sprawled across the length of the paper.

“Luke fourteen says, and I quote, ‘For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost.’ Let’s think about that for a minute. Jim, you told me you’re in construction, right?”

“Real estate,” Jim answers back.

“Well, let’s pretend you’re in construction. A contractor, let’s say. An engineer of some sort. I dunno. Spring’ll be on us before we know it. The construction season will start again. Do you plan on building a neighborhood without considering the cost?”

“Well, I don’t think so, preacher.”

“No, you don’t. Let’s continue. ‘Without considering the cost, whether he may have enough to finish it; *lest* perhaps,’ and I want to emphasize this, ‘after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish, all those seeing begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish.’”

John rises, touching Noah’s shoulder. “I’ll be right back, son. Save our seat.”

The boy looks up from his drawing and then continues to rub dark lines shooting from the base of a man's skull. John eyes the envelope and thinks it's supposed to be brain matter.

He hobbles toward the doors closest to him, his knees flared and aching. Once in the foyer he staggers to the bathrooms. The large windows on his left reveal a congregation of flakes, corpulent, diving toward the ground and against the building, hitting the glass in thumping torrents. In the bathroom, John can hear the buzzing and flickering of the fluorescent bulbs overhead that cast strange light upon the pale yellow walls. He stands in front of the urinal, tossing his tie over his right shoulder, and fumbles in the front of his pants, protruding himself and waiting. After a time the piss scratches its way out and hits the porcelain in small bursts of light brown.

"Goddamn," John mouths, gritting his stained teeth. He bends at the knees, trying to take some weight off of his swollen calves and heels.

Noah thumbs through the thin pages of the hymnal, folding a few of them. The woman next to him looks down and frowns. His gut grumbles and he puts the hymnal down on the pew. He holds his thighs tight and tries to stifle a fart.

The preacher paces back and forth, book in hand. He pauses and looks up at the congregation.

"Conventional wisdom seems to evade us sometimes, doesn't it?" he asks, just above a whisper. Noah notices a faint whistle attached to the preacher's s's that escape the gap in his front teeth.

“I know I’m just a guest here, and I thank you for having me. But I don’t want to build something here that I can’t finish. I want to make sure, before I leave today and head back to my own congregation, that you’re all really following me. Can you see through the construction of your spiritual devotion? Can you bear that cross and see it through? What are the costs involved? They’re consecration! Principle!” On this the speaker slams his small fist on the wooden pulpit. “And righteousness! I want to pay my way toward absolution of my sins. I surely do. I want to build a house within my soul that is strong. I want to build a house that is sound.”

The preacher points to the vast, wood-paneled wall behind him. It rises high and meets a pointed ceiling. “I want to build a large, gold cross right here on this wall. I want this church to truly pay that price tag! There’s no bartering with God! No haggling! Show him your devotion! Show this church your devotion!”

He lowers his voice once more and wipes more sweat from his brow. “Let us begin to pray, and then we’ll pass around the offering plates. Guests are not required to give, but are encouraged to do so.”

Grandpa inches into the sanctuary and shuffles back to the pew, sweaty and red in the face. He looks at the woman sitting next to Noah and furrows his brow. He rubs his thumb against his ring finger in haste, looking to the woman, then Noah, and back to the woman, visibly confused.

“I told you to save our seats,” Grandpa utters under his breath, plopping down in the pew. “Where’s your grandma going to sit?”



Noah, confused, looks to Grandpa and then to the woman. She moves as if she can feel them staring and pretends to search for something in her purse. Noah, the blood rushing to his cheeks, fights panic effervescing in his gut.

“No one sat here,” he begins, but decides not to argue. Grandpa looks in question, then back up at the speaker.

“Who the hell is that?” he asks himself quietly, waving away a collection plate. The woman next to Noah silently protests, rising from her seat and holding out a folded check to the man as he walks back toward the pulpit. She sits down, resigned, and shoves the check back in her purse, all the while staring daggers through Grandpa’s head.

The preacher tables the collection plates and steps down toward the congregation. “God bless,” he begins. “Thank you for your contributions. We have coffee in the foyer. Kids, we invite you stay behind for Sunday school.” He really lets the s go at the end, and Noah imagines it gliding like an invisible snake down the length of the chapel and out the door, floating through the cold air and battling its way through the heavy snow.

“I’ll be back to get you,” Grandpa barks, not leaving it up for discussion.

Noah wants to protest and Grandpa waves his large paw toward a man up front. The woman next to Noah scuffles by with a smirk on her face. She hands the check to the preacher and the two make their way behind Grandpa, conversing and laughing. The preacher throws his head back and the doors swing shut. Noah eyes the few remaining children scattered about the room and walks toward Naomi. She is alone and running her fingers through the curls of her hair. Noah sits down next to her and she acknowledges him with a slight frown. Naomi then scoots herself a bit closer across the pew, causing

Noah to flounder. He decides to cross his legs, mimicking Grandpa, hoping it will hide the bump in his khakis.

A silver-haired man enters the room and keeps brisk pace down the aisle. He stops between the two rows of pews. The man stumbles for a minute and hurries back toward the small closet near the entrance of the room. He emerges with an ancient projector, wheeling it toward the direction of the pulpit and turning it on. He places and adjusts a clear plastic sheet on the projector. Big block letters appear on the cross-less wall. Without any word, the few children in the room, Naomi included, begin to sing, unaccompanied by anything other than the sound of their own voices. Noah looks over the words and mocks by simply moving his lips.

The few children, along with the man, clamor. "I may never march in the infantry! Ride in the cavalry! Shoot the artillery! I may never fly over the enemy, but I'm in the Lord's army! Yes, sir!"

The man moves his arms, marching in place. Noah struggles to understand the words, but decides he wouldn't mind being in the Lord's army if he gets to shoot a gun.

■

Grandpa eases up on the stop sign and the station wagon fishtails, bumping into the curb.

"This snow!" he yells into the windshield.

The ancient wipers moan and squeal as they heave heavy lumps of snow onto the road. Grandpa accelerates toward the edge of town, heading farther from the church and into Old Weston. Noah notices the transition when an abandoned high school and towering, windowless building Grandpa says was once used as a crazy hospital back

when he was a boy replace the few Main Street shops and Weston's lone grocery store. They turn off the main road and onto one of the many gravel paths etched into the landscape.

The old man turns on the radio and adjusts the dial left and right several times before settling on a station that hums with the low whine of brass.

"Glenn Miller," Grandpa says, whistling to himself through his chapped lips and blowing sweet-stale breath that fills the car.

Noah rests his chin on his fist, staring out of the window. He imagines himself running along the ditches, keeping pace with the car. A horse appears, white as the snow, and Noah rides gallantly on the pavement by the ditch. He grips the reins and makes leaps and bounds along the embankment filled with snow. Noah and his stallion crash violently and explode into fiery ruination as Grandpa turns the car onto the last beaten path.

"You're awfully quiet," Grandpa remarks cheerfully, still whistling with the radio. He taps his foot to the tune and continues to catch the gas pedal, which sends the car heaving forward and jerking back. They hit a patch of ice and slide once more, Grandpa cranking the wheel in a desperate attempt to correct the car.

"Goddamn!" he yells.

"Grandpa?" Noah asks after few moments.

Grandpa remains silent. He grips the wheel tighter and leans forward, slowing down the station wagon.

"Grandpa?" Noah asks a little louder, hesitant of the old man's mood.

“Yeah, son?” Grandpa replies, gritting his teeth. He sighs heavily through his nose and mumbles obscenities under his breath. “This snow!”

“Do you miss Grandma?”

Grandpa continues to stare ahead, not saying anything at first. His whistling finally comes to a stop.

Slowly he replies, “Yeah.”

Noah turns back toward the window and spots a deer hopping across an open field of white. “I don’t remember her.”

“I know you don’t,” Grandpa replies. His knuckles go white. He speeds up a little as the ice dissipates into thicker gravel.

“Can you tell me about her?”

“What do you want to know, son?” the old man replies, almost missing the next sharp turn.

Noah plays with the zipper on his coat and then looks up at Grandpa with glassy eyes. “Tell me about her? What was she like?”

“She was some woman, son. Got on my ass a lot. Great cook. She loved you very much.”

“When I was a baby?” Noah asks.

“That’s right. You weren’t very old when she died. She had eyes for you, son. Talked to your mom on the phone almost every week when you were a baby. Your mom would sometimes mail us tapes of you. Got to see you walk for the first time.”

“Did Grandma look like me?” Noah asks.

Grandpa breaks his gaze from the road and looks to Noah. “What you mean?”

“She had dark skin?” Noah asks, knowing her appearance from photos, but wanting an explanation.

Grandpa laughs. “She sure did. Your grandma was from Iran. That’s where I met her when I was in the, uh, the service. It’s a country in the Middle East.”

“Where’s that?” Noah asks.

“Far away.”

“Did my dad look dark, too?”

Grandpa remains quiet for a moment. “Yeah. Yeah, he did.”

“Where did he go?” Noah asks.

“I don’t know, son.”

“Is he dead?”

Grandpa slows the car down as they approach the cemetery entrance, a small plot of frozen land gated by black iron rods and surrounded by thick, bending trees.

“I don’t know, son.”

Noah begins to cry.

“Is he in Hell?”

“Noah—”

“Everyone leaves me,” he says, barely audible over his spastic breathing.

“What?” Grandpa asks, coming to a stop.

“You’re going to leave me! You’re going to die!”

“Noah,” Grandpa begins. “Not for a very long—”

“Yes you are! You’re going to die and I’m going to be alone! That’s what happens when you’re old! You die! You’re fucking old and you’re going to die!”

“Noah!” Grandpa snaps.

Noah beats on the dashboard with his fists. The hollow blows are followed by violent kicking. Noah lifts his legs and begins attacking the windshield with his snow boots. Brown water flies in all directions, leaving muddied footprints on the glass. “I hate it! I hate it! IhateitIhateitIhateit!”

“Noah!” Grandpa screams. “Goddamn it, stop it!”

Grandpa throws the car into park, opening the door and hurrying to the passenger side of the station wagon. He pulls Noah from the car by his coat. The boy fights, kicking and screaming, catching Grandpa in the shin.

“Noah!” Grandpa yells, bowing. He forcefully turns Noah around in his massive arms and slaps the boy hard across the face.

Noah, tears and mucus trailing his chin, wails against the blow.

“Get it together, son!” Grandpa screams. A blot of blackbirds quickly escapes the branches of a nearby tree. “Stop it, right now! I’m not going anywhere, you hear me?!”

Noah wails.

Grandpa holds him tight against his gut. Noah’s tears infiltrate Grandpa’s coat as he bends slightly, gritting his teeth, shielding Noah against the cold wind that whistles between the crowded tombstones behind them.

■

Noah feels something like loneliness infect his chest, roost in his aching gut, although he’s not quite sure what it is or what to call it. The sunset casts purple across the frozen squares of barren yards lining the street. He pulls hard on the front door. The doorjamb clicks gingerly, Grandpa’s snoring still audible through the thick wood. Noah

crosses the front porch, stepping over black trash bags soft with clothing, into the flowerbed and front yard. He drags his feet, carving a path toward Naomi's house, looking over his shoulder at the windows indiscriminately lit by forgotten lights.

A car lurches past and kicks gray slush toward the gutter. Noah steps into her yard and onto the porch. He can hear his heart throbbing in his ears. Supporting himself on one of the tall, white columns, he leans over and peers through the open blind in the window to his left. Inside, Naomi's father is nested in a brown, leather armchair, his legs propped on a dumpy ottoman, the television squawking at him. Suddenly, the front door jerks open, startling Noah and causing him to lose his balance. He falls off of the edge of the porch, landing face first in the snow. Naomi emerges, laughing, emitting clouds of breath and looking as if she is burning from the inside. Noah picks himself up and wipes his running nose on the back of his glove.

"I'm sorry!" she says, trying to catch her breath.

Noah spits. "Do you want to go back to those holes?" he asks, wearing a straight face and looking her in the eyes.

Naomi's laughter is cut short. "No. I don't like it there. Hold on."

She stomps back into the house to grab her coat from the rack near the living room entrance.

"I'm going outside to play with Noah!" she shouts.

Naomi's father, his hands entwined and resting on his fat chest, lowers his thin glasses.

"Oh! Is that your friend from down the street?"

Noah tries to move away from the window.

“Yeah!” she shouts back.

“Naomi!” he beckons, starting to rise from his chair as she closes the door and cuts him short. In the window he throws his hands up in the air, shouting back at the talking heads in suit and tie.

“Do you wanna see the yard?” Naomi asks, already unlatching a tall, wood-stained gate. Noah pulls at his coat and adjusts his straw hat as he nods in agreement.

“Aren’t your ears cold?” she interrogates.

“No,” he replies, admiring the size of the back yard and the presence of a trampoline.

“My dad gets excited about the news,” she says. “We can’t have Bush as our president or the whole world is going to go to Hell.”

Noah, disinterested, walks toward the trampoline and calls over his shoulder. “Think we can jump on this?”

“No,” she responds. “It’ll probably break because it’s so cold.”

“What do you want to do, then?”

“I don’t know,” she says, sighing in exasperation. “Maybe we should just go inside. It’s really cold.”

“What’s in your shed?” Noah asks, pointing toward a small outbuilding with cream-colored tin tacked to its sides.

“My dad’s tools.”

“Can I look?” he asks.

“I guess.”



Naomi quietly follows behind as Noah unlatches the door. The single window inside allows a modest bit of remaining sunlight to reveal clean plywood walls, a lawnmower parked carefully toward the farthest corner. Inside the air is warmer, and the dust kicked up by their feet creates musty motes that shimmer as they float in the sunlight.

“Have you ever used a lawnmower?” she asks.

Noah thinks for a moment. “Yeah. I do all the time.”

He tips the brim of his hat and fingers a pair of hedge clippers tacked to the wall behind him.

Naomi reaches for Noah’s gloved hand and he reluctantly lets her have it. They both stiffen at the sound of broken snow near the fence. Naomi leans toward Noah as he moves in the direction of the door. She misses his mouth and lands a hard, wet kiss on his cheek. He turns toward her, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

“Do you want to go out?” she asks, her face turning pink.

“Yeah,” he responds. “We probably shouldn’t be in here.”

“No, stupid, do you want to be my boyfriend?”

Noah, his face and neck hot, pulls his hand from hers. “No. I don’t know. Won’t your dad get mad?”

“He won’t know I have a boyfriend,” she replies.

Naomi pecks Noah’s flat, colorless lips. When he doesn’t reciprocate, she does it again, pushing her oily face tight against his. He opens his mouth just slightly to breathe, and their teeth collide. She pulls back and holds her mouth.

“Sorry,” he blurts. Naomi takes off her gloves and readjusts her hat.

“It’s ok. Do you think I can see it?” she asks.

“Huh?” Noah responds. He follows her eyes south. “No!” he shouts, shaking his head emphatically.

“Shhh!” She steps toward him. “It gets big, right? Like at church?”

Noah nods his head.

“I just want to know what it looks like. You’re not scared?”

Noah sighs.

“Is it big now?” she asks.

He consciously pulls at his jeans. “Yeah,” he answers softly, looking out the window toward her house.

“Let me see it,” she repeats.

Noah pulls off his gloves. With shaking hands, his knuckles chaffed and red, he attempts to unbutton his pants. The wind picks up, the shed walls creaking and moaning.

■

Bodie breathes heavily as he forces his crooked forefinger toward the back of his mouth. He digs for a while, slack-jawed, coming up empty handed.

“It ain’t like John to sleep in,” he says to Ringo.

Ringo grunts acknowledgment, stroking his black beard as he flips through the pages of an ancient inventory log with pale, thin fingers.

“Ain’t like him at all,” Bodie repeats. He reaches into his mouth and his teeth meet his fat knuckles. He sighs heavily as he does so.

“You—” Bodie pauses and pulls his hand from his mouth. “You seen him today?”

“No,” Ringo replies without looking up from his book. “Maybe he’s still at home. Or maybe he’s up there at the hardware store talking to Ecton.”

Bodie runs his dark tongue across his teeth. “Yeah. Maybe.” He works his jaw. Sweat begins to bead on his brow. In a third and desperate attempt, he digs in between his molars and retrieves a large, opaque particle of food and plaque. He examines it slowly and flicks it to the floor. Ringo, looking up from the counter, frowns.

Bodie coughs into his fist and wipes his wet hand on the leg of his jeans. “What time you got?” he asks.

Ringo looks to the silent clock near the entrance. “10:55 or so,” he replies.

Bodie nods and rubs his thumbs together, smearing what’s left of newspaper ink. He stares at the dark stains. “Ain’t like him to sleep in,” he mutters under his breath.

He picks up his newspaper and mug, finishing the last of his coffee. Bodie thumbs through the news patiently, scanning the articles from top to bottom, and then lazily tours the business and sports sections, stopping to admire the comic strips. Ringo coughs and sniffs. Bodie can hear him turning the tattered inventory pages, heavy artifacts, sloppily licking his finger as he does so. His pencil emits loud scratchings as he writes down a figure, mumbling to himself. Bodie’s stomach growls in unison with Ringo’s snorting. The crinkle of newspaper chimes in and complements the tapping of pencil eraser against the counter. Rhythmically and in time Bodie’s large stomach snarls, a chorus harkening the rise and crescendo of tapping toes and tire slush and crunching gravel and the hum of fluorescent lights, the impromptu orchestra, the cacophony of inconsequential happenings and suffused silence.

Bodie paws his phone and looks for the time. He watches the digital minutes saunter by. He flips the phone open, then closed. Open. Closed. The plastic snap is deafening.

“Hmmm. Coal mine explosion,” he says to himself.

“Really?” Ringo asks, almost in a whisper, eyes still locked on the counter.

“Yeah. Says here, well, shit, hold on.” Bodie flips the newspaper over. “Says here that on the eleventh in kraz-no-dan Ukraine, wherever that is, that there was an underground explosion. Killed eighty-one.”

Ringo grunts after a moment.

“Yeah. Ain’t that somethin’,” Bodie continues.

“Bomb?” Ringo absently asks.

“No, dumbass. Methane, sounds like. Twenty-two hundred feet below ground.”

“Huh.”

“That’d be somethin’ though, huh? Bomb a coal plant?”

“Guess so,” Ringo responds, looking to Bodie.

Bodie runs his hand along his whiskered cheek. “Yeah,” he begins, “our coal plant could get bombed. Could be a terrorist target, ya know?”

Ringo laughs. “And how’s that? Why would a terrorist give two shits about Weston?”

Bodie considers this. “Well, it’d make sense, right? Coal plants, nuclear energy, oil, ya know? Take that stuff out and how do we power the country? We don’t.”

Ringo clears his throat. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Back in the days of the Old West, this place used to be somethin’. Gun fights and train robberies. Lotta money to be had. Quite the place, ya know?” He pauses. “People haven’t forgotten it.”

Ringo remains silent. He looks toward the clock and fingers his pencil lying on the counter. Bodie shuffles back and forth in the booth, painfully dislodging himself and swinging his legs short legs outward. “Well, I think I’m gonna go check up on John,” he says to Ringo, waddling out the door and not waiting for a response.

A few feet from the entrance, Bodie climbs into his blue truck, the loud slam of the worn Chevy’s door bouncing off the neighboring post office. He finally gets the pickup’s engine to cough and turn over. Bodie makes a three-point turn and gets his back tire momentarily lodged in a pile of plowed snow. It spins wildly before bucking him forward along the snow-spotted gravel lot.

Straight ahead, the wet road gleams. He squints his good eye, the bulbous, pockmarked lid slipping slowly. With the radio out and the engine loud, he hums and looks to his left at the adjacent field, big clumps of muddied earth, a canvas of oil pumps rocking steadily. Bodie counts them half-heartedly and almost misses the turn toward Main Street.

He edges slowly and rolls through the empty four-way stop before pulling up in front of the strip of old brick shops. Ecton’s Hardware sits between a pharmacy and vacant space. The glass door finally gives after a hard pull and a bell rings above head. Bodie stands in the entrance. He kicks his boots on the black mat underneath him and then stumbles past the empty counter. His squeaking steps leave wet tracks up the first

aisle, down the second, and back to the entrance. One of the lights above the counter flickers loudly. Although he's not quite sure why, everything feels pale yellow. He doesn't know how the hell else to explain it.

"Hello?" Bodie calls and coughs.

He rests his fists on the checkered countertop and slams the service bell in one ferocious slap.

"Hello?" he calls again.

Bodie waits a few moments, eyeing the counter. He finds a folded index card propped like a tent, etched with black marker.

"Fifteen minutes," Bodie mumbles to himself.

He looks around until he finds a clock hung up on the wall. It reads 11:30, but the red second hand is stalled.

Bodie then drives about half a mile toward John's house. He hits a pothole hard and bounces in the bench seat. Pulling into the driveway, the house is as he remembers it, yet the stone is stained and the green carpet tacked to the porch is tattered, juxtaposed with mountainous piles of stark black trash bags. Dead Christmas lights hang from the dirty gutters, drooping in places. Across the street, an elderly man shuffles toward his car, keys jingling in hand. A clean American flag whips loudly against a short mast in his front yard.

Bodie moves around the flowerbed in front and finds a path carved through the white rock toward the front door. He carefully steps onto the porch and knocks. After a few moments, he tries the knob and it gives easily. With a hard push he moves the heavy

door and it drags along the carpet. A musty odor hits him, a sewer stench, like stale freshwater.

“Jesus H,” he mutters.

He steps along a narrow path, edging among stacks of newspapers and magazines. They overtake what’s left of a coffee table and couch in front of the picture window. They spill onto the floor, towering stacks viciously fallen, the rubble littering the dirty carpet, crinkled, stepped on. The clock on the mantle ticks 6:00, which can’t be right.

Bodie moves into the den. The television is on. In a palette of silver, cars honk and a man steps from the back of a stalled taxi, regaled in a soldier’s uniform. He opens the passenger side door and removes his canvas bags. A second soldier, sitting in back, swings toward him.

“Some barracks you got here,” he says, admiring a tall apartment building in the heart of the city. “Hey, what are you, a retired bootlegger?”

“Nothing dignified with that,” he responds. “I’m a banker.”

Bodie enters the small bathroom to the right of the couch. He finds the sink running, gushing off-colored torrents into the dark basin. He turns it off and looks into the mirror ahead, a barren, wood-paneled wall reflected behind him.

“Take your hand out of your pocket, soldier. You’re outranked.”

“Yes, sir, Captain, sir.”

The soldier, alone, stands and looks up the length of the building, the sun strong in his eyes. Bodie turns out of the bathroom and flicks off the overhead light, inching toward the back bedroom and finding it empty. Something crunches underfoot and he hangs onto the wall for balance as he steps around piled picture frames and photo albums.

The guest bedroom and full bath quiet, dark, Bodie follows the sound of the television back into the den.

“Who’s at the door, Peggy?” the soldier’s wife calls from the kitchen. The stringed melody, soft, gradually intensifies, and she finds her husband standing with their two teenaged children. He approaches her slowly and they embrace before Bodie turns the television off and heads into the kitchen. He soon exits the house and goes around to the backyard, shielding his eyes and staring off into the empty plots beyond.

Bodie then trudges through the wet yard toward the driveway, stepping up and into his truck. He breathes heavy as he grapples in the pockets of his black polyester jacket, pawing for cigarettes. The fabric on fabric screams. He pulls out an empty pack and sighs. The plastic lighter rattles inside. He throws the truck into reverse and hits the gas a little too hard. As he meets the edge of the driveway, a passing van swerves and the driver honks maddeningly. Bodie pumps the brakes, the bed of his truck sliding out into the empty road, the van still blaring down the quiet street. He cranes his fat neck and flips the bird in the van’s direction, resignedly correcting the truck and heading slowly, reluctantly, toward Old Weston.

Houses outline the landscape in neat rows, and as Bodie moves on, the old truck lumbering forward, those gaps in between neighboring homes become further apart, and successive dilapidation is soon met by barren fields amidst a gray horizon. Soon, it begins to mist. Bodie sets the windshield wipers high. They squeal and smear wet dust. He leans forward and strains his good eye. He stops abruptly when pavement unexpectedly meets gravel, spotting John walking unsteadily along the edge of the road.

“The fuck?” Bodie mumbles.



He creeps, keeping pace with John. Bodie pulls a few feet ahead and stops the truck. He reaches across the seat and cranks down the passenger window.

“John?” he yells, cold mist whipping him in the face.

John walks past the truck, face forward, his arms white and exposed in the short sleeves of his collared shirt, his face and nose and forehead rubbed red by the wind. Bodie jumps out of the parked truck and toward John, noticing ice collected on his whiskered jaw and the hair of his exposed chest.

“John,” he yells again, catching him by the arms.

Bodie looks into John’s eyes but doesn’t recognize any semblance of consciousness behind the yellowed whites, streaked veiny and red, somnambular and empty.

“John,” he mouths more slowly. He digs his foot into the gravel to keep John from moving forward. “John, are you all right? Can you hear me?”

John furrows his brow. He looks at Bodie, then rubs a large hand through the thin, wet hair matted to his temples and across his bald crown.

“John?” Bodie asks again.

“Yeah, yeah,” John replies. He stops struggling against Bodie’s heft. His teeth chatter.

Bodie helps him into the cab of the truck. He shuffles around the front and gets in.

“Let’s get that heat up,” he says to himself.

John leans forward, his arms propped on his knees and his forehead resting against the dash.

“John, are you ok?” Bodie asks.

John grins. "I was good, but I got over it."

Bodie frowns. "Jesus, it's freezin'. What're you doing?"

John sits up and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his front pocket.

"You want one?" he asks Bodie, offering him the pack as he puts one to his mouth.

"Yeah, sure," Bodie responds. "When'd you start smokin' again?"

John looks ahead at the hazy windshield. "I dunno." He turns to Bodie, rubbing his forearms, his initials tattooed in heavy black just below his elbow. His skin is loose. The letters fold in on themselves.

Bodie hesitates. "I can pick up Noah this afternoon," he offers. John's eyes sharpen at Bodie's words. They well up just as quickly.

"I should prolly get you home," Bodie continues. "I'm sure he's gonna be gettin' out soon."

"Yeah," John whispers. He rubs his ring finger with his thumb. His knee shakes. He wipes his wet eyes, snorts, and stares out of the passenger window, his chin resting on his fist.

"What time is it?" he asks after a few moments. The engine starts to plead.

Bodie grabs his phone from the console and finds it dead.

"I don't really know," he replies.

■

"You gonna go down?" the boy asks again. He clenches his teeth, baring them.

Noah turns away and stares down the short length of the hill. Spots of brown grass peek from beneath a thin, wet blanket of snow. A small, hand-built mound sits directly in

his path just a few feet from the bottom of the hill. Sleds saunter by at varying speeds, reds and blacks, kids from his grade and those above, below. Noah feels a sharp-knuckled nudge on the back of his naked neck.

“Dipshit!” the boy yells. “If you’re not gonna go down the ramp, then move!”

Noah faces the boy, tipping the brim of his straw hat and looking him in the chin.

“I’m gonna go,” he replies.

The boy narrows his eyes. “Well? Sit on your sled.”

He places both gloved hands on Noah’s shoulders and shoves him to the ground.

“Go down the hill!” he screams, his face reddening.

Behind them a couple walks the narrow, asphalt path bending around the hill, a small dog chirping, paraded on a short leash, the two lost in conversation, laughing and throwing their hands about in a careless kind of way. The boy looks over his shoulder and motions for one of his friends. He drops his snowboard and stomps over. Three young girls hug themselves and roll toward the walkway, snowballing and laughing as their paths converge and they topple over one another.

“Fourth grader?” one of the boys asks.

Noah plants the length of his plastic sled into the soft ground, using it as a crutch. He brushes mud and snow from the back of his jeans.

“Hey, sand nigger,” the second boy calls. “The fuck you staring at?”

The taller of the two snatches Noah’s hat and tosses it ahead of him. It spins and lands near the snow mound, upturned and looking small, the straw frayed around the edges and stark against the white backdrop. A few children begin to gather around the

scene, some laughing and others pleading. Those others move to the backside of the hill and continue sledding.

Noah is pushed between his ribcage. His chest concave, his arms extended, he is forced down limp. Noah rolls, his feet and the two boys melding with flashes of sky as snow fills his ears and nose. Just as quickly, he lies with his face buried in the ground. Afraid to move, Noah tries to draw in breath from his swollen lungs. He grits. Copper-tasting dirt crunches between his molars.

The boys laugh. Noah cracks one eye and stares into the ground. He remembers the neat squares of light dotting a woven blue blanket. Cast upon his head, draped down his shoulders, he sits upright in the bright grass and throws it forward, unveiling clumps of thick hair and a toothless smile which is returned by his mother, her plump cheeks resting atop painted lips, blonde ropes coiled down the sides of her face, all illuminated by a strong sun.

Noah gets to his feet and begins trekking up the hill. The boys turn toward him and plant their feet firmly apart, square with their shoulders, a dodge ball stance. Noah reaches the first and lands a gloved, balled up hand into the square of his gut, the boy doubling over. He heaves and Noah brings another pudgy fist down upon the back of the boy's neck. He falls forward. His friend clumsily swings toward Noah with both arms and scrapes the side of his exposed cheek. They both fall to the ground, all three in a pile. Noah fights the pain in his face and turns him over and punches firmly against the boy's white throat. His eyes bulge and he mouths something, spit bubbling between his lips. Noah hits his trachea again and again. Noah notices that it doesn't make any sound, not like on television. He then stands up and brings a boot swiftly down on the boy's

forehead. A muddied, bloodied mess meets his hairline and he lets out a silent wail. Noah turns to the first, his hands around the boy's throat, and pulls him toward the bottom of the hill. His feet drag earth behind him. Noah's shoulders tight, he uses what little heft he has to roll the boy.

He tumbles and begs. "Stop!"

Noah breathes heavy. "Yer a goner."

"What?" the boy pleads, trying to catch his footing. Some older kids, perhaps even an errant adult, run toward them from across the other side of the small park.

Noah grabs him by his arms. The boy spins Noah around and drops him to the ground, the two coiling into a ball.